

Interview in "Brain Circulation and Researcher Mobility"

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Dr. Thomas Pölzler is a postdoctoral researcher and lecturer in the Philosophy Department at the University of Graz, Austria, where he also received his Ph.D. Prior to this role, he visited the Psychology Department of the College of Charleston, South Carolina, on an Erwin Schrödinger Fellowship from the Austrian Science Fund. For the resulting research, Dr. Pölzler was awarded the ASciNA Young Scientist Award. This ASciNA Award, funded by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, recognizes excellent scientific accomplishments of Austrian researchers in North America. Dr. Pölzler's research focuses mainly on metaethics and moral psychology. He is particularly interested in the validity and metaethical relevance of empirical studies of morality.

Could you describe your research interests and the topics you are working on?

My research focuses on how we should act and live, especially from a moral point of view. I am interested in whether there are objective moral values. What is required by justice? How should countries respond to climate change? And, do our lives have meaning? Philosophers have typically approached these questions by appealing to their own intuition. Most of my recent research, however, is informed by science. I try to show how we should morally live, by studying or drawing on studies about people's moral cognition and behavior. I bring ethics together with other disciplines such as psychology, neuroscience, and evolutionary biology.

You studied at universities around the world as a visiting student and visiting researcher. Why is it important that researchers gain experience abroad?

Going abroad allows researchers to connect and work with leading experts in their fields. We learn new approaches and methods and can perfect our foreign language skills. There are also

personal benefits: We can become more independent and self-confident, and increase our awareness of and tolerance for cultural differences. Especially in the humanities, these personal changes can ultimately improve our research. For me, seeing that people of different cultures hold very different basic moral values enhanced my perception that not all our values have an objective basis. Parts of morality may be culturally relative.

An Erwin Schrödinger fellowship allowed you to conduct research in the Psychology Department at the College of Charleston. Which aspects of that experience were most valuable to you?

Erwin Schrödinger fellowships allow researchers to develop their studies independently and in a highly focused way. Professor Jen Wright was my host at the College of Charleston. Thanks to her, I could take full advantage of this great opportunity. She took time to collaborate extensively across a number of topics. Linking her psychology expertise with my philosophy competencies was especially fruitful. I also very much enjoyed Charleston's non-academic amenities. It is an exceptionally lovely place. I often think back to strolling through its downtown streets lined with palm trees and colorful houses, with the smell of the sea and warm weather in the air.

How has your research abroad influenced your current work at the University of Graz?

I gained first-hand insights into methods, potential, and limits of psychological studies, which benefited my research tremendously. I also still collaborate with Professor Wright. Among other projects, we are currently writing a book that synthesizes and expands on the research we did in Charleston. I have also started to apply some of my new methodological skills to alternative subject matter. I am particularly interested in studying how ordinary people across various cultures think about the concept of basic needs. Such studies could be important for determining states' duties of justice, especially in contexts such as climate change or the COVID-19 pandemic. It seems plausible that each person should, first and foremost, have a chance to meet their basic needs. I am looking into that.

What value do you believe students and researchers who spent time abroad bring back to the STI communities of their home country?

Home institutions tend to benefit from such exchanges in a number of ways. They gain new methods, fresh knowledge, different networks, and so on. After my return from the U.S., I teamed up with a colleague from Graz. We wrote a research proposal and a paper together.

Both benefitted significantly from the new psychological expertise I obtained working in Charleston. I also arranged for a graduate student from Graz to run studies and co-author a paper with Professor Wright and myself.

What role do you expect international collaborations and exchange to play in your ongoing career?

Both will continue to play central roles for me. I am engaged in ongoing research with Professor Wright. I have also started cooperating with researchers from Brazil, Japan, Spain, and other countries. Those researchers will join my basic needs project and provide data on how people in their various countries think about these needs. Once the coronavirus pandemic is under control, I can move beyond video-conferencing and visit collaboration partners in person for at least several weeks a year. I very much look forward to doing so, in ways that minimize the environmental impact of my travels.