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Interview with Vassilis Saroglou

Interviewer: Congratulation on being awarded the Quinquennial Excellence price in social and human sciences from FNRS! In its statement, the FNRS highlighted the remarkable interdisciplinarity of your work, and its anchoring in current societal challenges. What are you most proud of so far in your career?

Vassilis: Since the beginning of my research career, I well invested in and enjoyed interdisciplinarity already within psychology, including in particular personality and social, cross-cultural, and moral psychology and psychology of positive emotions, not mentioning the interdisciplinarity between psychological sciences and other social sciences and the humanities.

Then, with a series of passionate students and collaborators, I empirically, including experimentally or meta-analytically, investigated many [research questions](#)--I dare to think original and intriguing ones--of both theoretical interest and societal relevance. This becomes perhaps clearer when we consider that, contrary to our small Belgium, the world population is still today by more than 70% religious, and that psychology is by definition an international science.

Here are few examples of our past research questions: Does religion's historical mistrust of humor translate still today into believers' personality and behavior? Is Western hostility toward the Islamic veil primarily motivated by defense of liberal values or by classic prejudice? Is religious prosociality a myth or does it translate to behavior? Under which conditions subtle religious primes can activate either morality or, on the contrary, sexism, homophobia, and submission? What distinguishes awe, admiration, and elevation from other positive emotions? Is fundamentalism the same in its psychological antecedents and outcomes across the major world cultures and religions?

What I am most proud of is the fact that [many pieces of this work](#) have been widely [cited](#) and this across almost all psychological disciplines (from developmental psychology to evolutionary psychology), and even beyond, in several other social sciences and the humanities. This influence even went into citations in reference books (international handbooks and textbooks) of the various disciplines, including several textbooks of introduction to psychology (highly selective of citations).

I: Could you say a little word about your recent research interests, and you plan on working on in the future ?

V: In the very recent years, in my lab, we focused on the deontology versus consequentialism moral conflict. We studied not the conflict between deontology and instrumental harm (as in the famous trolley dilemma) but the conflict between deontological morality and caring morality (e.g., white lies, or collectivistic moral foundations as limiting and opposing care for proximal others). Prioritizing the formal morality is at the heart of all kinds of ideological radicalism and violence. We also applied this framework to understand what motivates opposition to the legalization of euthanasia, abortion, and gay adoption.

In parallel, we developed research investigating possible dogmatism of nonbelievers, in particular of atheists in secularized contexts, and furthermore their possible prejudice toward their ideological opponents, which include not only antiliberals but also mere religionists.

For future research, I am now rather in a wait-and-see position. What will our new normality be, if any, after the current pandemic? As a universalist, I prefer not to anticipate much “new” normality.

I: You have been awarded your PhD at UCLouvain in 1999, and then you got the travel bug for a little while. How have those international experiences shaped your career?

V: Since I intellectually and scientifically invested, through publications, in several psychological fields (personality, social, cross-cultural, political, emotions, religion) and other disciplines or research areas (religious sciences, sociology, humor studies), with my lab members, across the years, we have been pretty active in participating, with papers and symposia, across the world, in the international conferences of these fields. In addition, I paid attention to spend, each time, half of my postdoc and of the two sabbatical years in different Universities in the US, by choosing to go in places where I could learn a lot rather than places where I simply had many good friends and colleagues.

All the above, in addition to allowing visiting and experiencing some wonderful places in the world, contributed, I presume, to some breadth and diversity of our research questions and methodology. Importantly too, they solidified for us the perception that what we are doing in science may be good and thus source of personal satisfaction, but also is in fact a very small piece within a big and complex puzzle and thus we have also to be humble and ready to accept that some years later our research will very likely be outdated.

I: What advice would you give to early career researchers today?

V: Please allow me to use two metaphors: doing research is like a police investigation; and publishing is like painting. Carrying out a study, especially if it is at an exploratory stage, is like being an investigator of a crime: you consult all available sources, you look at everything, you search under the surface. But then, deciding what is the “evidence” to announce is like bringing only some of the elements of the investigation into the court, i.e. the solid ones and the ones you were expected to. There are strict legal conditions for what is evidence and what is not.

The residual information is not lost: it remains in the back of our mind—for future investigations.

Publishing is good, being cited is better, making a point and being associated with the point you made is delicious. Painting is what the artist needs for communicating his ideas to others; having the work appreciated in an exhibition is rewarding; and having the artist's name--together with others'--associated with a "school" is really precious.

And a more practical idea: if, in the beginning of the research career, passion moves us, then it is important to preserve this passion throughout the whole career. This will protect us from the side effects of the bureaucratic and competitive facets of the academia. But passion does not exist only by itself: it has to be proactively and strategically cultivated. For instance, by not only going to our narrow field's smaller conferences where most people know and like us and our advisor; but also, by going to high level international conferences and following the talks of big scholars, including those outside our field.

I: As researchers in psychology, we are experts in certain aspects of the human's response to its environment. Given your specific expertise, do you apprehend the current sanitary situation with a certain prism? Is there an advice that you wish to share, that could help your colleagues and/or the general public cope with the situation?

V: In Belgium, our [excellent colleagues](#), especially from health psychology and social psychology, follow very well the current situation and make very helpful comments and recommendations publicly. Perhaps, questions that are less discussed in the public sphere are the ones that need expertise from researchers in developmental psychology (e.g., interaction between cognitive and social development in adolescence), personality psychology (e.g., adopted measures may have diverging effects depending on people's personality), family and couple psychology (e.g., relationship satisfaction in uncommon contexts), and cross-cultural psychology (e.g., cultural differences between ethnic groups, including on beliefs and attitudes toward science and medicine; religion's role in shaping conspiracy beliefs in the political and medical domains).

Interview by **Axelle Calcus**