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Stanford Women in Science Addressing COVID-19 Needs

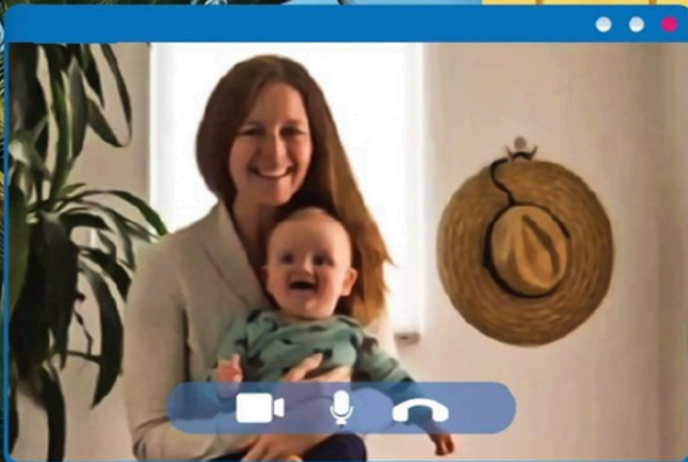
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Alia Crum, PhD



Cheryl Phillips, Lecturer



Erin Mordecai, PhD



Tina White, Graduate Student

Academics Without Borders

By **Tanya M. Smith, PhD**
AWIS Member Since 2014



My first trip overseas was a fluke. I wasn't part of the well-coached contingent of foreign exchange students from my suburban high school in upstate New York. Yet when a close-knit group of German students turned up during my junior year, I found myself enthralled by their foreignness. Novel music influences, passionate political opinions, and a bit of skepticism about America and Americans sent me into an adolescent swoon. As they headed back to Düsseldorf, Germany, after an all-too-brief exchange, I relentlessly strong-armed my mother into allowing me to visit them. Knowing little about Germany save for what I had absorbed from my new friends, I naively dove into my first international immersion shortly after turning seventeen.

Psychologists describe resilience as the capacity to overcome adversity. Living—and eventually working—abroad has created myriad personal stress tests for me. Thinking back on that initial trip to Germany, I vividly recall pushing a shopping cart through a grocery store alone, unable to speak the language, and feeling both incredibly vulnerable and profoundly liberated. Fourteen years later that feeling returned as I inadvertently walked through a latenight neo-Nazi protest in Leipzig, a city in the former Soviet satellite with massive unemployment and a rising far-right movement. The city had suspended public transit after rowdy midnight Silvester (New Year's Eve) celebrations—forcing my partner and me to calmly work our way through riot police and inebriated protesters in order to get home from a Max Planck Institute colleague's party.

I've come to cherish not only how such unplanned international experiences have stretched my self-confidence, but also how they have informed my science. Perhaps not surprisingly, I am an anthropologist, although I've chosen to specialize in human evolution research rather than in the better-known field of cultural anthropology. Tracing our evolutionary history for a living has brought me to particle accelerators in France, left me scrambling after lemurs in Madagascar, enabled me to comb the Kenyan des-



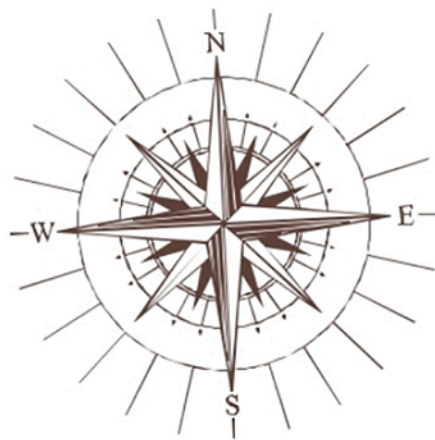
ert for signs of ancient life, and allowed me to share kangaroo tail stew in the Australian Outback with Aboriginal Traditional Owners of ancient homelands.

Through formal study of humanity in all its facets, anthropologists adopt the lens of cultural relativism—a framework that views differences without moral judgment. Withholding judgment is a tall order for many academics, but it lies at the heart of unbiased scholarly exploration. Buddhists would take this a step further, noting that beliefs, opinions, and preferences cloud our ability to fully experience the present moment. Whether we academics are conducting research at farflung field sites or engaging in animated discussions with peers at international conferences, our present moment

experiences underlie motivation, and novel perspectives fuel innovation.

The Curse of Familiarity

In between early career stints conducting research overseas, I worked in academic departments at two U.S. universities that held opposing views on whether to hire their own graduate students for faculty positions. One, a state university, held that it was best to bring in fresh perspectives that would diversify the department. The other, an elite private university, implicitly exalted its own students, an attitude reflected in a faculty body with an inordinate number of degrees from the same institution. Ironically my department in the former state university was ranked higher, based on scholarly productiv-



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ity, than the insular Ivy League program, despite the massive endowment of the latter institution. Importantly, beyond the advantages that revered institutions or privileged environments offer in terms of funding or reputation, their supposed exceptionalism doesn't guarantee innovation, and it often fosters inequity.

I'm now several years into a faculty position on a third continent, where I often ponder the characteristics that distinguish workplace cultures. In Germany, members of my department would bake and offer a celebratory cake on the annual anniversary of their employment, which we'd share in the kitchen over coffee or tea. This annual "gratitude practice" was met with bemused appreciation when I imported it to the United States, yet it elicited little more than indifference from most of my Australian colleagues. While working in France I grudgingly learned to appreciate the post-lunch stop at the coffee bar next to the canteen, where physicists, computer programmers, and biologists would stand around tall tables drinking espresso and nursing ideas at leisure without the immediate need to perform. And I can't forget the playful camaraderie of our Madagascar field crew, who filled the long hours of remote expeditions with lighthearted banter that subtly reinforced their care for one another despite living in a nation of grinding poverty. As an aloof and solemn scholar, I was neither familiar nor comfortable with these professional dynamics at first, but I learned their inherent value in each novel context. Those moments of simply being present taught me to slow down my "judging mind," connect, and work differently.

The Future of Academic Work

With all eyes currently focused on the economy and on signs of medical progress, it feels surreal to be barred from traveling internationally. Like many American academic expats, I've missed my professional association's annual conference, which would have been the twentieth consecutive U.S. gathering at which I would have presented new research. As our workplaces and professional organizations strive to flex and adapt, we have the opportunity to consider which of these familiar activities really are essential for scholarly progress and true innovation.

Most academics do not consider their profession a "day job." Our curiosity and commitment to understanding the world don't end when the sun sets, nor are they tied to an institutional affiliation or a national boundary. Numerous friends have sacrificed their personal lives and moved their families multiple times in order to gain the protection of tenure, a coveted shield for "academic freedom" in one's future career.

In the spirit of academic freedom, I offer this thought experiment. In their book *CoActive Leadership*, Henry and Karen-Kimsey House suggest: "We create the world. Together. Every day." What if those of us with the privilege of tenured job security belly up to a virtual coffee counter and earnestly discuss the world we want to create? Might we return to our physical workplaces with a commitment to uncovering the insidious biases that have led to profound inequity and stifled innovation within our professions?

Early career researchers across the globe are now staring down a year or more of hiring freezes, staff reductions, and disrupted research productivity, an effect that may already be impacting women disproportionately. The heightened risk of losing first-generation college graduates, people from historically underrepresented groups, and those with disabilities may reinforce confirmation bias and groupthink at a time when we can least afford

it. What if we started each day—created each new world—with an acknowledgment of gratitude for the people and practices that have allowed us to overcome adversity, and with a deeper commitment to support the next generation of scientists without bias? Imagine the effect on our students, families, and global communities if we worked together with a spirit of curiosity, openness, gentleness, and humor in service of the possibilities of the day to come. ♣

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