Choosing the hard road

When I opted to pursue a bachelor’s degree in psychology in the 1980s, it was commitment more than joy that carried me through the first semesters. I was interested in learning about human behavior, but I was frustrated that robust mechanistic explanations seemed to be missing. I wondered whether I had chosen the right path. Then, one morning, lightning struck when I heard a lecture by an instructor from a local medical school about the brain and behavior. I realized that I wanted to explore both sides of the coin—not only mental acts, but also the neurobiology of phenomena like memory. But there was a problem: This type of interdisciplinary approach was pretty much unheard of at the time in Switzerland, where I lived.

I had to choose between following my newfound inspiration, which would mean embarking on a career with potentially no job opportunities in my home country, and something safer and more conventional, but less intellectually satisfying. I chose the hard road—without realizing quite how hard it would be.

The decision was a no-brainer. It seemed that interdisciplinary research could solve many of the scientific problems that individual disciplines were struggling with, and I didn’t want to waste time with anything else, even if it meant professional uncertainty. So I enrolled in neuroanatomy and neuropysiology courses while also following the standard undergraduate psychology curriculum—and I loved it.

Pursuing an interdisciplinary Ph.D. seemed to be the logical next step. The type of research I was interested in was growing in other countries in ways that it wasn’t in Switzerland, so I decided to go abroad. Working in Germany and the United States, where cognitive neuroscience was blossoming, I found great professional stimulation and satisfaction.

Ultimately, though, after earning my Ph.D. and completing two postdocs, I wanted to bring the interdisciplinary approach that I so enjoyed back to Switzerland. I knew it would be tough, but I was determined to pursue the work I loved in my home country. I got a position at a medical school with dual responsibilities as a research group leader and the head of a clinical neuropsychology unit. I was optimistic about my future prospects, but I had trouble publishing my work for a few years because my results challenged established theories. Then, when the first Swiss neuropsychology professorship was announced, I was thrilled that my field seemed to be making some inroads, but my half-empty CV did not get me the job.

The situation became worse when my bosses pressured me to switch to clinically relevant research. All seemed lost. After weeks in bed, ill with an infectious disease, I returned to work and grudgingly established the line of research my bosses favored—but I carried on with my interdisciplinary basic research. I had to work harder than ever to fit it all in, but quiting on my core interest wasn’t an option.

The tide turned when both lines of research yielded robust results. My papers started getting published. I secured a newly established professorship in neuropsychology at the institute where I had earned my undergraduate degree. The first course I was asked to teach was the brain and behavior lecture that had inspired me years earlier.

If I had to do it all over again, I would take the same journey, though maybe with a slightly different mindset. My older self would tell my younger self to not worry so much, to handle challenges playfully, and to develop and foster other talents and interests outside of work. Now, as a professor, I encourage students to take risks and blaze their own paths. But they also need to know that doing so typically requires some trade-offs and detours. It requires perseverance and a certain degree of independence from superiors and commonly accepted measures of success. In return, though, this path offers an authentic, passionate, and meaningful life.

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