

# Brussels Stout

November 10, 2004

**Shepperd** and Hoorens descend the Steps of Erasmus, once home of the 16th century humanist Desiderius Erasmus, who lectured at Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, where Shepperd performed research on human bias. The steps are all that remain of the original home and now lead to a place where visitors can get their hair cut.

Psychologists have long known that people display a variety of biases in the way they process information and think about the future. These biases include: the *comparative optimism*, whereby people believe negative events are less likely to happen and positive events are more likely to happen to them than to others; the *durability bias*, whereby people overestimate the duration of the emotions they experience; and the *intensity bias*, whereby people overestimate the intensity of their emotional experiences.

One cannot help but wonder how much these biases overlap, and whether there is an underlying psychological mechanism that ties them together. It was this curiosity that brought me to Belgium as part of the Fulbright scholar program.

I spent the spring 2004 semester addressing these issues with Vera Hoorens of Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, in Belgium, where I received a Fulbright fellowship. Founded in 1425, KU Leuven is one of the oldest universities in Europe. Today it enrolls 28,000 students and is a magnet for scholars around the world.

Leuven is a charming city of cobblestone streets, located 20 kilometers from Brussels. Although much of the city was destroyed in WWI and again in WWII, the city planners restored many of the original buildings and constructed newer buildings in the traditional, medieval style. Visiting faculty are housed in the Groot Begijnhof, an enclosed community in the city center founded and constructed by a religious order of women in the 1600s, and acquired and renovated by the university in the 1970s. My wife and I lived in a flat that was a 10-minute walk from my office.

**James Shepperd** (left) and colleague Vera Hoorens (center), along with her husband Gijs, stand in the center city of Leuven, Belgium, where Shepperd studied on a Fulbright scholarship.

Hoorens and I spent the semester reading articles, debating the central issues, and devising studies to test the hypotheses relating to these future oriented biases. In some ways, pursuing this collaborative research project was challenging. KU Leuven has a limited infrastructure for doing this kind of research. Research resources I took for granted in the United States were in short supply at KU Leuven. For example, there was no readily available subject pool for quickly collecting large amounts of data, and there was no army of research assistants available to enter and proof data. Back issues of journals were often difficult to obtain from the library. Nevertheless, our collaboration proved quite enlightening, fruitful, and rewarding. Hoorens and her graduate students, as well as other faculty in the department, went out of their way to help me get settled, to debate my ideas, and to facilitate our research. In addition, the statistical software and the online computing and library systems were state of the art, and the university provided ample technology support. These resources helped me be extremely productive during my five months in Belgium.

The data we collected are preliminary; however, it appears that we can and should think of these various biases similarly. These biases arise in part from the way people process information about themselves and their over-reliance on case-specific examples from their personal experiences when making judgments. In contrast, people rely more on average stereotypes when making judgments about other people. Consequently, they do not show these same sorts of biases – or at least show them less acutely – when predicting outcomes for the average person. The preliminary data we collected will serve as the basis for continued collaboration and several future studies.

The Stadhuis, or town hall, of Leuven, is perhaps the best preserved town hall in all of Belgium.

In addition to my work with Hoorens, I gave invited talks at universities in Germany and the Netherlands. These invitations provided opportunities for the exchange of ideas and for future collaborations. Moreover, my time at KU Leuven and my visits to other European universities provided insights on how other countries train undergraduate and graduate students and conduct research.

Fortunately, my time in Belgium was not all work. I was 90 minutes by train from France, Germany, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands. My wife and I took excursions every weekend, visiting the major cities in Belgium and making more extensive trips to Amsterdam and Paris, as well as to the Alsace region of France and the Black Forest Region of Germany. We also attended Fulbright-sponsored trips to the Opera House of Ghent, the WWII cemeteries and museums of Luxembourg, and the Gaume region of Southeast Belgium. On these trips, I met other Fulbright scholars and we engaged in lively conversations about our research interests and experiences abroad.

Being in Europe included an ever-present awareness of American-European relations and US involvement in the Middle East. A frequent question from my American friends was, "How are Americans perceived in Europe?" This is a legitimate question. Recent polls suggest that the attitude of non-Americans toward the United States is at an all-time low. I was warned in advance to keep a low profile and to avoid displays and activities that might call attention to me as an American (e.g., avoid wearing baseball caps, white tennis shoes, or clothing with lettering or insignias of American organizations). Yet, at no time did I feel animosity or hostility from the people I met. Quite the opposite! My wife and I were welcomed and greeted with warmth everywhere we went. Indeed, conversations we had with Europeans from various countries revealed that, while Europeans have negative feelings about the decisions of the American government, they truly like Americans.

I am deeply grateful to the Committee for the International Exchange of Scholars and the Fulbright Scholars Program for allowing me the opportunity to live and work in Belgium. This experience was highly rewarding in terms of the research collaboration, the bonds of friendship formed, and the countless personal interactions and encounters that can only come from extended immersion in a different culture.