

Psychological Science Spanning Scientific and National Boundaries

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In my view, psychological science in the Netherlands displays two distinctive features: an international outlook and a scientific enterprise that is increasingly defying traditional boundaries.

By its very nature, science is an international endeavor. Genuine scientific insights do not change as a function of national boundaries. The solutions found to problems and the application of science often do, however. Scientists from diverse backgrounds and viewpoints are interested in working together to identify how these problems may be addressed. The need to communicate internationally has led to the adoption of a common language, which was Latin early on, then French and German, and now English.

Nearly everybody speaks English in the Netherlands, from the greengrocer to the academic, albeit to different levels of sophistication. Indeed, a wide range of courses at the universities, particularly at the masters level, are given in English. The fact that everyday and academic communication can be conducted in the current currency of scientific communication is very different from many other university systems in Europe, where language barriers (either in everyday life or the university context) curtail the openness of the scientific community to newcomers from different linguistic communities. Consequently, the number of non-Dutch academics in Dutch universities appears to me to be much higher compared to other countries in Europe — certainly in psychology. This openness means that the choice of candidate for any single position at any level (from PhD research positions to full professorship) can be made from a substantially larger pool. Beyond the obvious benefit — namely, the quality of recruits — such permeability of the academic system also encourages the creative and innovative synergy that differences in background bring about.

Of course, the fact that everybody speaks English is not a guarantee for being completely in tune with your colleagues and with people at large in a new culture. Acquiring Dutch, which in some universities

is obligatory after a period of time, not only shows your readiness to learn the culture, but facilitates closer ties in your everyday life. Acquainting oneself with the culture is also one of the most important conditions for learning to live in any community and the Netherlands is no different in that respect. I know a number of foreign colleagues who, despite the fact that they acquired the language, have continued to face challenges due to the fact that they did not appreciate the culture in which they found themselves.

After this brief digression about the necessity of immersing into a culture, let me turn to the second feature of psychological science in the Netherlands, which is a scientific enterprise that is increasingly defying traditional boundaries. The last 20 years have seen a Dutch psychological science renaissance. It is becoming an innovative and productive voice that is occupying an increasingly significant position internationally, with more journal space, citations, and innovative new contributions. Considering the size of the country, which is just over 33,000 square kilometers, and its population of just over 16.5 million, the scientific output is remarkable.

This achievement is probably due to the formalization of the PhD trajectory in the late 1980s and the establishment of inter-university research schools in the early 1990s. The research schools introduced a number of innovative structures for the advancement of both graduate training and science. The inter-university character bridged traditional departmental structures and enhanced existing national collaboration. In addition, a number of the research schools were given crucial seed money by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO), which contributed to the success of these fledgling institutions.

One of the key elements in this success was the internationalization of graduate training. Outstanding scholars from around the world were invited to visit the Netherlands and give short, intensive workshops. These visits strengthened international networks and led many a graduate student and faculty to engage in collaborative work with the visitors. This has led to an increase in professionalism and provided the generation of the 1990s access to an international platform.

Another factor that made these research schools a source of strength in enhancing science was the bundling of resources across universities. The Dutch university system is gradually moving from inter-university graduate schools to university-based research institutes. Time will show if this path will prove successful.

More recently, the NWO has focused on supporting talented individuals at different stages of their careers. This model has been emulated by the European Science Foundation, which, for the last four years, has been operating the European Young Investigator Awards (EURYI), a program that has been adopted by the European Research Council. This program was designed to facilitate “braingain,” namely to attract outstanding young scientists in all research domains from any country in the world to create their own research teams at European research centers. Over the last four rounds, 15 of the 95 awards have gone to young Dutch scientists. The Netherlands is the second largest recipient of these awards after France, which was awarded 18 EURYIs. This reflects the international outlook and the synergy that this outlook is creating in the Netherlands, a vibrant and innovative location for psychological science.
