



MY YEAR IN WIKO-LAND, 2008–2009  
ROBERT L. TRIVERS

---

Born in 1943 in Washington, DC. Education: 1972, Harvard University, Biology, Ph.D.; 1965, Harvard University, History, B.A.; Employment History: 1999–present, Adjunct Professor of Pediatrics, UMDNJ; 1994–present, Professor of Anthropology and Biological Sciences, Rutgers University; 2005 (spring), Visiting Professor of Psychology, Harvard University; 1978–1994, Professor of Biology, University of California, Santa Cruz; 1975–1978, Associate Professor of Biology, Harvard University; 1973–1975, Assistant Professor of Biology, Harvard University; 1971–1972, Instructor in Anthropology, Harvard University. – Address: Department of Anthropology, Rutgers University, 131 George Street, New Brunswick, NJ 08901-1414, USA. E-mail: [trivers@rci.rutgers.edu](mailto:trivers@rci.rutgers.edu)

I came to Wiko with only one goal – to finish a book on deceit and self-deception. The topic is massive and sprawling, including, on the scientific side, evolutionary theory, animal behavior, neurophysiology, immunology and social psychology, and, much more broadly, airplane crashes, warfare, religion, everyday life and the construction of false historical narratives. I had already done a modest amount of work on the subject, spread over some 35 years, and two years of intensive work after my genetics book was finished (2006). Now was the time to bring together whatever I knew in a single book. I leave Wiko with most of the book in hand.

The environment provided by Wiko is very conducive to work. It is completely supportive, the Bibliothek being the best library I have ever worked with. The fact that books and book chapters are often delivered one day after requested is “aber unglaublich” when you consider how difficult it is to get material not on the Web. Finally, a “sehr gemütli-

che” social environment surrounded us in our daily lives. It is not frequent in my life that I get to drink two bottles of red wine every Thursday evening during an excellent dinner in the company of at least 40 friends and/or Fellows. But to me the most beautiful social part of Wiko occurred behind Villa Walther every afternoon at 16:00 when the children got out from school. The back area is (to my eyes) a children’s paradise, my son loved it when he visited, and I loved watching all the children play while I pretended to work nearby.

Wiko also has a series of rules and although I am not by nature a “regelmäßige” person I followed every one of them because I saw each as being in my self-interest. I accepted no invitations outside of Germany and limited my additional travel to one trip home to handle personal business. Although this was the Darwin year, I turned down invitations to Switzerland (no loss there) and Sweden (ditto) and two to Brazil (painful, I have always wanted to go there). I only gave one on Darwin’s birthday in Göttingen, a city some people regard as a suburb of Berlin. All other lectures were delivered in Berlin itself (including Potsdam).

Even regular attendance at the Dienstagskolloquium was to my great advantage. Not only did I get some writing done during every colloquium except my own, I also learned something very important that I did not know – these days I write best in the morning. Once I noticed this, I changed my schedule so as to try to pretend that there was a colloquium every day and I would leave my apartment in Villa Walther – with its computer, e-mail, internet, telephone and peanut butter safely behind – and sit in the empty colloquium room on Wallotstraße for two hours, allowing myself out only to drink one cup of coffee and to urinate (my rules during the real colloquium). Incidentally, I always split off some degree of consciousness during the lecture itself so as to gain at least a rough idea of what was being said on what kind of subject, but when the “Quatschstunde” arrived (discussion) I bore down on my work with full force. And so also when the room was empty I made sure to go all out during the second hour, same way.

It is my intention to send copies of my book to all 40 fellow Fellows so that, among other things, people can look for any unacknowledged material that their talks may have added, but I do warn those lecturing in German that New York copy editors are a hard-bitten lot and unlikely to let fragments of German, much less complete sentences, escape their knife.

Equally important was direct intellectual help from my fellow Fellows. Holk Cruse, my neighbor, was the first, teaching me in his home the anatomy of the brain by pointing

to various places on his skull. Although I sometimes worried that the anatomy I was learning only applied to a head shaped like Holk's, I soon learned this was not true. Holk also put me onto the latest fMRI work showing how long the delay is between unconscious initiation of motor activity and conscious awareness.

The next was a gift from Wiko, five months of Bill von Hippel's very valuable time. Bill is an authority on social psychology, with particular expertise in findings and methodologies relevant to self-deception. Social psychology, in turn, is a vast swamp – at most one out of five papers worth reading, but which ones and why? The area easily threatens to swallow you for two years and with an uncertain outcome. Nothing like that. Bill left Wiko with a 100-page paper we managed to write that, if it did not exactly drain the swamp, at least permitted us to navigate it. I am deeply grateful to him and his family for their fellowship and for the great organizational and conceptual work he has done on the social psychology of self-deception.

In response to my Tuesday colloquium Srinu Narayanan offered to give an hour-long PowerPoint presentation to Bill von Hippel and myself on the neurophysiology of deceit and self-deception. In the process, he taught me some fundamental things about the larger subject of neurophysiology. For example, far too many articles (almost half of those on social neurophysiology) make an elementary error – they use the same data that they used to calibrate their measurements to test predictions regarding these measurements. This is logically illegitimate and leads to artificially inflated correlations, as is easy to prove.

Thomas Metzinger also went well beyond the minimum. When Bill and I asked him for a half-hour session on the function of consciousness, he gave us instead an hour's PowerPoint on the key findings and graced this with the gift of his book on the subject, *The Ego Tunnel*. Other Fellows contributed according to need and expertise. Although Roger Chickering first taught me the meaning of the word "hectare", this was just to upgrade an ignorant person. He also kindly read my chapter on "Self-deception and war", contributing both valuable corrections and key references. He too gave me a book. Other biologists made specific additions to my knowledge, Cynthia Moss on mimetic moth warning calls to bats, for example, Patrik Nosil on the evolution of both food and sex mimicry in the orchids and John Kennedy on the structure of psychology and of the art of the blind. Ibrahim Thioub contributed a paragraph on the Sufi small (outer) *jihad* and the greater (inner) one. Other help I await in the future.

Contacts in Germany outside of Wiko also proved very valuable. I am now working with two scientists at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin-Dah-

lem who have completed the first of a set of experiments on self-deception they designed in response to the lecture I gave there. More importantly, when giving the Darwin lecture in Göttingen, I had the chance to share a glass of wine or two with the head of Georg-August University, one of the sponsors of my talk. Kurt von Figura is one of the world's authorities on the lysosome and it turns out that the lysosome plays a key role in our immune system, something I had never known. In the best "Schnellkurs in Biologie" that I have ever received, I learned that 10% of all of the protein we produce is immediately degraded in the lysosome. This otherwise wasteful-looking procedure permits internal parasites such as viruses to be detected, when otherwise you could not tell them from self, while earlier stages of lysosome development, e. g. after engulfing a bacterium, permit the same recognition for bacteria. In ten short minutes, the man taught me more immunology than I had learned in the preceding 20 years. I begged him not to cast me adrift. He went to his enormous Presidential office, took out a huge Max Planck directory, flipped to a given page and said, "Stefan Kaufman, you go see Stefan Kaufmann at the IMPRS for Infectious Diseases at the Hauptbahnhof in Berlin". "Jawohl, mein Herr," my heart answered and a short two weeks later I was learning yet more immunology from Stefan and his top assistant. Von Figura has already read my chapter on the "immunology of self-deception".

On a somewhat related topic, I published a small book this spring showing that a major paper of mine, published in *Nature* in 2005, on bodily symmetry and dance, is a complete fraud (*The Anatomy of a Fraud: Symmetry and Dance*). Here Horst Eidenmüller gave me very valuable counsel regarding the problem of being sued for libel in the various jurisdictions of the world, in one of which the ultimate defense is the so-called "Italian Torpedo", about which perhaps the less said the better. And Horst acted as the good counselor on one or two other lego-social matters that arose during my tenure.

Finally, I also learned many things not directly related to my book. Karin Mölling taught me a world of virology, and without Anna Konik how would I know what a performance artist is – or what striking visions they can achieve? In summary and in short, I benefited enormously from my visit here, my book was written and my life was greatly enriched by numerous new friends and contacts. I am most grateful.