



GROWTH AND REFLECTION
AT THE WIKO
LAITH AL-SHAWAF

Laith Al-Shawaf was born in 1988 and spent his childhood and teenage years in Europe and Lebanon. Laith completed his undergraduate studies as a Merit Scholar in Psychology, Philosophy, and Cognitive Science at the American University of Beirut, where he graduated with the Penrose Award, the university's highest award for graduating students. Laith then moved to the University of Texas at Austin, where he completed his Ph.D. in Evolutionary Psychology along with an additional specialization in Applied Statistical Modeling. He has taught and conducted research in the United States, Lebanon, Germany, and Turkey, and during this time he also worked as a statistical consultant and as an instructor of gifted teenagers at Johns Hopkins University's Center for Talented Youth. He is currently an Assistant Professor of Psychology at Bilkent University in Turkey and a member of AGYA, the Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities. His research focuses on human cognition and emotion. – Address: Department of Psychology, Bilkent University, 06800 Bilkent, Ankara, Turkey.

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Thoughts and Reflections

The Wiko describes a College for Life Sciences Fellowship as “a break from the lab, but not from the excitement of science”. This is apt, but too modest. We ought to describe it instead as “a break from the lab and a *rejuvenation* of your interest in science”. Early-career life scientists spend too much time in the lab, too much time cranking out

peer-reviewed papers, and too much time worrying about minute methodological details. Seldom do we have the time to step back, reflect, and consider innovative new directions. And seldom do we have a space that gives us the opportunity to fall in love with science all over again. The Wiko provided this opportunity in spades – an opportunity that was so beneficial it's nearly impossible to do it justice with a short written description.

To my mind, the benefits flow to the College for Life Sciences Fellow on three levels, each enough to recommend the Wiko on its own: 1) time to keep pursuing your ongoing projects, resulting in new publications, 2) time to read, think, and write, resulting in novel ideas for new research programs that are more innovative and creative than what your research-inertia rut had you doing before, and 3) a feeling of decreased pressure and enhanced well-being owing to the lack of daily requirements and the absence of the academic rat race (not to mention the lush, verdant surroundings and the serene lakes). The Wiko is a dual-function anxiolytic and power source for the early-career life scientist – join, relax, and recharge!

Accomplishments

During my tenure at the Wiko, I had two main projects: my long-term philosophical book project, and my ongoing primary career in psychological science. I'm happy to say I made substantial progress in both domains.

My scientific work thrived on the wonderful freedom accorded to us by the Wiko: during my five-and-a-half months here in Berlin, I submitted six peer-reviewed scientific manuscripts, four of which are first authorships or sole authorships and two of which are second authorships. Of these six, three have already been accepted for publication and three are under review.

Freedom and time both contributed immensely to my book project in philosophy. I used this time to read broadly and think deeply, and the result was three kinds of beneficial change. The first: the substantive content of the book improved as my arguments matured and my treatment of key issues deepened. The second: the structure of the book became more meaningful, as well as more tightly and logically organized. And the third: I have begun to better understand where my ideas fit in – if this is not too grand a phrase to use about one's own work – in the history of philosophy. I haven't begun writing, but I did not plan or expect to begin writing. I am in the reading-and-thinking phase, a most enjoyable phase and an intellectually exciting time that I will forever associate with the

Wiko. These few months have, I think, successfully laid the foundation for my next few years of thinking and research. I owe this progress and this intellectual enjoyment to the freedom of this environment and the relaxed, encouraging atmosphere at the Wiko.

I should mention one other fortunate development that took place during my stay at the Wissenschaftskolleg. I submitted an application to be elected a member of the selective Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA), was shortlisted for the position, and was chosen to be one of AGYA's newest members. I'm honored to have been selected and look forward to the work I'll be doing: improving science and philosophy education in the Arab world and using principles from psychological research to improve teaching practices in Lebanon and Germany. This, too, was made possible by the free and stimulating nature of the intellectual environment at the Wiko. I'm grateful for this dual gift of time and intellectual freedom, and I will always remember it as a most beneficial launching pad for my early career.

Personal Growth

My time in Berlin has also been a time of personal growth and quiet reflection. The physical and mental freedom we have at the Wiko has provided a natural opportunity to reflect on career direction and life satisfaction. In many areas, my thinking is still ongoing and my questions are still unanswered, but the contemplation has been undoubtedly beneficial. I've reoriented my career trajectory somewhat as a result, and the change is both comforting and exciting. I've also given a lot of thought to non-content issues surrounding my book: how and when and in what manner to proceed and to what extent it should be geared toward popular or scholarly audiences. It hasn't all been solo contemplation, though: I'm happy to say I've made new friends and developed what I hope will be lifelong correspondences. From the outside, then, this "personal growth" section may look like a loosely connected hodgepodge of items, but to the author it feels coherent and unified: I'm leaving Berlin having learned new things about myself, my career, and other people – and I have grown as a result. I'd like to extend a huge, heartfelt thank you to the Wissenschaftskolleg for making all of this possible.