



A PHYSICIST, A PHILOSOPHER
AND A PSYCHOLOGIST ENTER A BAR ...
GORDON FELD

Gordon Feld is a psychologist in the field of sleep and memory processing. Born to an English mother, he grew up in the German countryside close to the city Frankfurt am Main. He graduated from the University of Mainz in 2009. In 2014, after moving from the University of Lübeck, he received his Ph.D. from the University of Tübingen for his work on the neurochemical mechanisms of sleep-dependent memory consolidation. In 2016, after an initial postdoc in the lab of Jan Born, he received a fellowship from the German Research Foundation (DFG) to join Hugo Spiers' lab at University College London for two years. There, he investigated how sleep transforms memory traces. To "gain time to think", he spent six months at the Wissenschaftskolleg transforming his research pipeline towards open science and reproducibility. He is currently leading an Emmy Noether Research Group at the Central Institute of Mental Health in Mannheim researching the relationship between sleep, memory and addiction. – Address: Central Institute for Mental Health, University of Heidelberg, J5, 68159 Mannheim, Germany. E-mail: gordon.feld@zi-mannheim.de.

Getting in

When I saw the call "Gain time to think" for the College for Life Sciences Fellowship at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, it immediately resonated with me. I had just returned to University College London after Christmas break and had to run a tightly scheduled brain-imaging project. I had only very little spare time to write my proposal, so I was super-surprised to be invited to an interview. On the day of the interview, my plane was

delayed for two hours, and I made it into the reception with about five minutes to spare. The interview was pleasant, but the questions were spot on, not ever trivial. Thus began my journey to the Wissenschaftskolleg – commonly known as Wiko.

The Arrival

I arrived at the flat in the Villa Walther on Saturday, that is, two days before the beginning of the academic year. I was driving alone in a car full of our belongings at the end of a two-day trip from St. Albans, UK, where I had just handed over our house after two years of our British adventure. Driving through the lush Grunewald Forest in the late afternoon light of this summer day, it was a huge surprise how close to our new home it was. Katha, Sophie and Liah were waiting for me in the flat of this 1900s villa at the edge of huge Berlin. The mood was set for an exciting experience, and I was not disappointed.

Getting Things Done

On the first day, Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, the Rector of the Wiko, gave a welcome talk. In it she mentioned the many pressures on an academic, the deadlines, the productivity assessments, all of that. She told us that this is not the way things are done at Wiko and that “das Haus” believes the Fellows are the best judges of how to spend their time. The freedom that comes with such an announcement is hard to convey. I came to Wiko to do a lot of boring work transforming my research pipeline to more open and reproducible science. I did not do much of what I had planned. Instead, shortly after I arrived at Wiko I got a letter informing me of the Emmy Noether grant I had been awarded by the DFG, and I spent a lot of time organizing things for this. On top of this, I had a huge backlog of things that needed to be done from previous projects and I prepared a number of manuscripts. The thing that took the most time was organizing a workshop at Wiko. Ulrike Pannasch had talked me into applying to the Fritz Thyssen Foundation to get some money and invite some sleep and memory researchers. The workshop took place on the last two days of my stay at the Wissenschaftskolleg. During the workshop, we founded the Sleep, Oscillations and Memory Network (SOMNet), which aims to improve the reproducibility of sleep research. I think it is not an overstatement that this network will likely do many times more for my project goals than any individual effort of mine could have accomplished. Time well spent.

Not Getting Things Done

As much as I have benefitted from the things I did get done at Wiko, I must admit that the time spent not getting things done was probably even more important. Interacting with the academics from diverse fields of study as well as the authors and artists was incredibly inspiring for my work as a neuroscientist. I was able to peek outside of my academic bubble into the colourful world of all the other subjects and disciplines. To give just two examples, it was breathtaking to hear from diplomat Heidi Tagliavini how she, the chief negotiator in the Ukraine conflict, experienced one of the most convoluted diplomatic situations in recent European history from the inside. Equally, it was astonishing listening to Jessica Stockholder about her endeavors to probe the borders of the arts. In fact, her work inspired me to think differently about neurons in the brain that detect borders and how they may react to art that does not obey their predictions. Discussing these issues afterwards with biologists, lawyers, theologians and philosophers added a depth that I do not think I have ever experienced before. And yet, one of the most remarkable memories I have is that of a karaoke evening I spent singing songs together with architects, physicists and biologists. Fellows are just people. It was remarkable that within a short time we were all on a first-name basis, even when speaking German with my German colleagues, which is unheard of in German academic institutions. If anything, this is proof of the forward-thinking attitude of all of the scholars at Wiko; I will deeply miss them.

Aftermath

I am writing this during the hottest days of July 2019 after having left the Wissenschaftskolleg about five months ago. Already my time there seems like a distant dream, rather than a part of reality. Could this really have happened? The sheer density and diversity of thinking in an ambience saturated with scholarship is already unbelievable. The venue in the middle of Berlin Grunewald with its lakes and villas feels taken from another time. However, it was the friendliness and inclusiveness of the whole group of Fellows that stands out. I have seldom felt so at home at an institution, even if it was only a home for some time. Wiko can rightly be called the epitome of the ivory tower, but in the best possible way. A Babylon of science, where the Fellows may often not speak the same language, but make every effort to understand each other. It gives a glimpse of what a world

that is filled with only academics might be like. Such a world would be wonderful and quirky, but of course, it would not work. It is the wonderful staff, who make such a thing work at Wiko, who lend us the time, who create this improbable place, who brought us all together and who make us all talk to each other – thank you for this unique experience. And thus, we may only spend what feels like a brief moment and then must go back out to the world – back to the hamster wheel ...