



TALES OF A BABY FELLOW  
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Following a childhood passion for playing with bugs, Kevin graduated in Natural Sciences in 1997 from Cambridge University, where he focused on evolution and behaviour. He got his Ph.D. from Sheffield three years later under the supervision of Francis Ratnieks on the subject of reproductive conflict in social wasps. From there, he switched continents and biological kingdoms to go to Rice University, Houston, Texas to study the social life of slime moulds with Joan Strassmann and Dave Queller. While in Texas, Kevin also developed wider-ranging interests in the general theory of evolution, especially as it pertains to social behaviour. Kevin left Rice to be at the Wissenschaftskolleg and on leaving Berlin will take a short fellowship in Helsinki before moving to Harvard as a Fellow in Martin Nowak's Program for Evolutionary Dynamics. – Address: Program for Evolutionary Dynamics, Harvard University, 1 Brattle Square, Cambridge, MA 01238, USA.

The Wissenschaftskolleg yearbooks are full of the Fellows' vivid accounts of their experiences and, like you, I have only had time to read a few. But immediately one is struck by the challenge in writing one's own report. How is it possible to say something new or distinctive? Against this charge, I have but one perhaps dubious asset; I was the youngest Fellow to date.

It all began on a cold winter's day in Guildford. I was back in the UK from Houston on a visit to my parents in my hometown of Portsmouth. Well it turned out that Francis Ratnieks, my former Ph.D. supervisor, was at the same time just down the road in Guildford visiting his parents. In his message to me, he said rather cryptically that he had "something he wanted to talk about". So we decided to meet up and in a room surrounded by what

can only be described as an excess of dogs (his mother likes to look after dogs), we discussed life, science and the future. It was here that Francis mentioned that he had been invited to spend a year in Berlin and perhaps I would like to come along. My time in Texas would be coming to an end by then and the idea of working again with Francis was very appealing. I agreed.

I remember my first moments at the Wiko vividly. The taxi ride from Tegel was with a very nice driver who wanted to chat in the native tongue, which resulted in a very animated dialogue with only one active party. (So rather more of a monologue I suppose.) I did my best to nod and smile a lot and to this day I don't know the subject of our conversation. But this played a role in setting the stage and as I shuffled up the front path of the Kolleg, overly heavy cases in hand, I finally realised I had indeed left Kansas (well Texas anyway). Within moments though, I was rescued by a staff member who welcomed me and ensured that my suitcases were carried to my Neubau apartment. This was the first of many wonderful encounters with the staff, who would never cease to amaze me in their generosity and kindness. The transfer to life in Berlin was as painless as could be imagined.

Indeed the Kolleg was a haven for the most pleasant of people in the most pleasant of surroundings. Not only the staff but also the Fellows I was soon to learn were, without exception, the finest of folks. But what was it like to be a young Fellow? My experiences in this regard were nearly all positive. Shared conversation could sometimes be challenging at first as one struggled to find something in common. Adding a generation gap to the subject divide did little to alleviate this and I had to perhaps earn my place in conversations a little more than amongst my normal peers. But, in little time, wonderful personalities emerged from the faces around me and I met some of the most colourful and interesting people that I have yet known. And being the youngster certainly had its advantages, as I could learn from those with wisdom that so greatly exceeded my own. I am hopeful that this was not all one way and that my attempts to communicate a little of sociobiology were successful. But perhaps my biggest contribution to the Wiko will end up being (along with Steve Davis) setting up the "Wiko climbing club" and luring several Fellows to try our irrational passion for scaling lumps of rock.

So what did I learn exactly? It is almost certainly too early to say. The diversity of the knowledge gained from a group of Fellows is lasting and likely to be pop up and manifest itself when you least expect it. That said, what I learned from the members of my focus group is clear. Innumerable conversations with Tom Wenseleers and Francis Ratnieks discussing the concepts and nuances of evolutionary biology have advanced my thinking to a

considerable degree. These chats spanned the long breakfasts, lunches, dinners, and incorporated walks to Grunewald with its compulsory meal of *Spiegeleier mit Bratkartoffeln*. Many projects and papers are the concrete result of this most pleasant of industries. From the Fellows at large, the most valuable experience for me was to encounter the humanities. Indeed, it is only now that I realise that, before Wiko, I had little idea what a practising historian, philosopher or political scientist actually did. The weekly colloquia and resulting conversations provided an introduction to the subjects and particularly the methodologies of the “other side” of academia. And I am hugely grateful and indebted to all of those that took the time to educate me better in their expertise. In addition to the general nature of the knowledge gained, there were specific gains as well. For example, we had a special symposium dedicated to the role of androcentrism in the recent history of thought, and particularly in biology. When this was set up, like many, I felt we were all in danger of talking at cross purposes. There was even talk of people turning up “just to see the fight”. But I was delighted that when we all sat around the table I was able to follow the discussion and understand every point of view. I feel much the wiser for it.

Indeed, I was generally very impressed by the humanities and it became clear that the differences between our disciplines were often more apparent than real. Most points where there were clashes (and there were some) could be attributed to simply asking a different question of the same topic. For example, in one colloquium, there was a lively debate about the relative roles of culture and genetics in determining anger. Predictably, the humanities community emphasised culture and the biologists emphasised genetics. However it became clear that because the question being asked specifically concerned cultural change in the last few thousand years, there was no need to be concerned about genetic effects. It was not that the humanities denied genetic effects; they just realised that they were just not relevant to this particular issue.

If there was an exception to my fondness for the humanities, it would have to be the post-modernist school. At its extreme, this takes the view that all knowledge and thought are purely context dependent and culturally constructed. I can appreciate the basic validity of this statement but when taken to an extreme it devalues the sciences as “social constructs” that have no intellectual primacy over other belief systems. The utility and explanatory power of the sciences over other ideologies makes this difficult for me to accept. Furthermore, the deconstructionist approach seems to reduce the pursuit of knowledge to a mere series of descriptions with little hopes for synthesis. From my no doubt naïve point of view, it seems to have a lot in common with natural history. In this tradition, every

species is described in its own context with little regard for others or for the general principles that might unite features of all life. Natural history is a valuable and sometimes neglected part of biology, but it is undeniable that the more modern emphasis on evolutionary theory has taught us an enormous amount about the world around us. It is perhaps most galling to me that the extreme post-modernists have come to be called “theorists”, when really they seem to subscribe to no theory at all, just a collection of somehow connecting facts. To return to the positives though, I do feel that post-modernism has something to say in that we should all be aware of the context in which knowledge is obtained, and indeed this was the central lesson of the androcentrism debate. But like most things, it should be taken in moderation.

From here, I move into the relative normality of life as a young scientist once more and its world of specific and focussed pursuits. But I take the spirit of the *Wissenschaftskolleg* with me and will continue to explore broader contexts whenever I can. All in all, it has been a fine year.

For a list of works produced at the *Wissenschaftskolleg* by the “conflict resolution group” in 2004/05, see p. 175 (report of Francis Ratnieks).