

## An interview with Prof. Dr. Diane Sunar

Dear Diane Sunar,

First of all, I would like to thank you for accepting an interview with me.

I would like to introduce myself again. My name is Bahar Balcı and I am a social psychology master student at Başkent University. We did not meet before personally but I listened to your presentations at the I. Social Psychology Congress in Ankara and at the III. Social Psychology Congress in İstanbul. Now, with this interview, I want to get to know and reintroduce you better. The psychology community has already known you well but I ask you to talk about yourself for those who do not know you well, especially for students. I would appreciate it if you can give some information about your personal life (your family, marriage, children, etc.) in addition to your academic identity. Now, I would like to start my questions.

**B.B.:** You got your bachelor's degree in the field of English in the U.S.A., but you got your Ph.D. from psychology. What caused you to change your field? Why did you switch to psychology?

**D.S.:** First, a little information about my personal history. I was born in Mississippi but my family moved to California when I was in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. When I graduated from high school, I won a full scholarship to attend Whittier College. I was undecided about a major (in the American system you choose your major later) but enjoyed my literature classes and declared myself an English major. Later, I took a course in the psychology of personality and realized that I was much more excited about psychology than literature, but by then it was too late to take enough psychology courses for a double major. I did, however, squeeze 3 or 4 psychology courses into my final year.

I got married that year to my classmate from Turkey, İlkey Sunar, and he was accepted to the doctoral program in political science at UC Berkeley. So we went to Berkeley and I started working as a social worker in the welfare department of Alameda County. After a time there, however, I realized that I really wanted to do graduate work in psychology, and applied to the UC psychology department – and amazingly was accepted. I had read Erikson's *Childhood and Society* with great fascination, and in my "statement of purpose," I told the admissions

committee that I wanted to study “the nature of human nature” including both the person and society. It is no accident that the course I am teaching this semester – 55 years later – is called “Human Nature”! ☺ Switching fields by starting a doctoral program is not easy; the first semester I felt as if I might as well be looking at Chinese characters rather than reading English. But with a little guidance, and by discovering Roger Brown’s classic social psychology textbook, I recaptured the excitement that had led me there in the first place, and never looked back.

(By the way, some of the top psychologists in Turkey made similar switches. Reşit Canbeyli, Hamit Fişek, Ercan Alp, and Bilge Ataca are just a few of those who came into psychology after graduating in other fields. I think Turkish psychology would benefit by being more welcoming of graduate students from other fields.)

**B.B.:** Could you talk about your story of coming to Turkey from the U.S.A.?

**D.S.:** We moved to Turkey (Ankara) in 1972; İlkey had just finished his dissertation, and mine only needed a conclusion and editing (my degree was awarded in 1973). İlkey joined the Siyasal Bilgiler Fakültesi at Ankara University (Mülkiye, that is to say), and I went to METU’s Department of Social Sciences. (Çiğdem Kağıtçıbaşı, whom I had met in her last year at Berkeley and who was then at METU, helped me make the connection with METU.) The years I spent at METU (1972-79) were marked by intense political polarization in Turkey, with many conflicts and literally dangerous moments, both on campuses and in the neighborhood where we lived, which interfered badly with academic work. Those were also the years that our children were born (Sibel in 1973, Kenan in 1976).

**B.B.:** You worked at several universities such as METU, Boğaziçi, and Bilgi University for long years. What do you want to say about your long career in Turkey?

**D.S.:** These three universities each have unique characters, and I consider myself fortunate to have been a part of all of them. They had one thing in common, which might be surprising to some: they were all very new when I joined them. METU had been founded some years before, but the social sciences department that I joined was only a few years old, and the whole university still had a fresh vision of excitement and striving for excellence in all its fields. I had highly qualified colleagues, together with excellent students, several of whom went on to become professors themselves. Unfortunately, the university was fought over by different political factions and soon lost many of its best members, students and faculty alike.

When the opportunity arose in 1979, İlkay and I also left Ankara for Boğaziçi University, where we both taught for 23 years before officially retiring.

Although Boğaziçi University has a long history dating from its earlier form as Robert College Academy and Yüksek Okul, in fact, it was only founded as a state university in 1971, and Psychology only became a separate department in the Faculty of Letters and Sciences in 1983, four years after I arrived. Although Boğaziçi was not untouched by the political upheavals of the '70s or the military coup of 1980 and the establishment of YÖK that soon followed, compared to METU, it was considerably more insulated from politics. The atmosphere on the campus was highly collegial; many of our cohort of faculty members (at that time more or less early-career scholars), like their counterparts at METU, had recently returned to Turkey with Ph.D.'s from top universities in the US and UK. And even though it was a "new" institution, Boğaziçi was already a top choice for the highest-scoring students. So once again, I had the privilege of teaching exceptionally bright and interested students, a number of whom are now members of the department or who are teaching at other universities – and even some who retired before I did!

After 23 years at Boğaziçi, I was eligible for retirement from the state system, and just at that point, I was invited to found the psychology department at Bilgi. Although I struggled to make the decision to leave Boğaziçi, I was attracted by the chance to contribute to a newly developing university, and in 2002, I joined the Bilgi faculty. Bilgi was unique in being founded as a university with a focus on social sciences, and its founding faculty members shared a vision of independent thought, inclusiveness, community service, and respect for human rights. It was an atmosphere in which I felt at home, and the challenges of building up a department (rather than just joining it) did indeed provide me with many new experiences, chief among them taking on administrative roles. For the first 11 years, I served as department chair and was also a member of the university executive committee. Then, just at the point when the university was going through an enormous set of changes due to a change in ownership, I served for nearly three years as dean of the faculty and then another four years as an elected member of the university senate.

To sum up, my career has been mostly spent in institutions and departments that were newly developing, and all of them have been impacted by external events in significant ways. In all of them I formed close relationships with many of my colleagues as well as lasting relationships with many students.

**B.B.:** You have taken part in many national/international projects in your academic life. Do you see this as a part of your academic identity? What are the benefits of being in projects to scientists and academicians?

**D.S.:** I have always been open to collaboration, and in fact, I have relatively few single-author publications. Where we have been able to find common interests, I have collaborated with my colleagues; with my graduate students; and with colleagues from abroad who were interested in doing cross-cultural studies.

I'm not sure that I participated in projects or generated my own projects with an eye to career plans or strategies, or that I was trying to create an "academic identity". My academic identity was defined more by intellectual curiosity than the publishing side of the profession: a focus on particular areas of interest, and following relevant developments in those areas; being open to new ideas, even those that on occasion overturned my previous assumptions and beliefs; trying to forge a coherent vision to communicate to the students I was teaching; and close attention to accuracy and clarity in my writing. Even though there is considerable continuity in my interests, I am happy to say that my understanding of the psychological mechanisms and processes that I study is continuously changing and developing. Many of my views have changed over the years, and perhaps my most basic academic identity is that of "learner".

As you point out, I have participated in several international projects. I have done so when the projects held intrinsic interest for me, and I have used them not only as a source of publications but as a means of engaging students in serious research. The greatest benefit of participating in international projects is that they contribute to cross-cultural psychology, allowing us to discern similarities and, importantly, differences, in the operation of social and psychological processes in different cultures.

**B.B.:** When we look at your studies in recent years, we see that you have mostly focused on morality. What is the reason for this?

**D.S.:** The psychology of morality has been an abiding interest for me since my graduate school days. I was lucky enough to listen one day to Lawrence Kohlberg, who had been invited to speak at a departmental colloquium at Berkeley. From that day forward, I was fascinated by issues in moral development. Whenever the opportunity arose, in the form of a thesis student who shared that interest, I supervised their research. In the late 1990s, I

encountered E. O. Wilson's speculation that aspects of morality might have been selected through evolutionary processes, which sent me off on an entirely new direction – exploring not just factors in moral development, but the very basis for the existence of morality. I proceeded to organize seminars exploring the possibility of an evolutionary basis for morality – thereby learning that biologists had been working on this idea for well over 20 years by that time. The effort to understand the implications of this new way of looking at the problem eventually led to my 2009 paper, in which, as its title suggests, I attempted a “new integration”. I was not the only one: moral psychology was suddenly a hot topic in social psychology all over the world, and I was fortunate to reconnect with my former student Sevim Cesur (now a professor at Istanbul University) and some of her graduate students, with whom we have carried out several research projects and produced a couple of major publications in the past five years.

**B.B.:** As is known, there are a lot of subfields of psychology. You studied different subfields such as social, developmental, evolutionary, cultural, and health psychology. What do you think about the divisions of psychology? Is there any division that you feel closest to you, and if so, what is it?

**D.S.:** I think the subdivisions of psychology are pretty artificial but they are sometimes convenient for classifying people and research topics. In my case, most of my work takes place at the borders of these artificial categories: how is child-rearing related to culture? how is child development relevant to adult social behavior? what promotes moral development, and how is that related to human evolution? how does morality vary across cultures? how do relationships influence stereotypes as well as moral behavior? is it possible to use knowledge about all these processes to promote greater peace in human relations?

**B.B.:** You had a role in the foundation of the Mother-Child Education Foundation (AÇEV) in addition to your academic works. Can we listen to the story of the foundation of AÇEV? Also, you are still a member of AÇEV Boards of Advisors. Can you tell us about the today of the foundation?

**D.S.:** My relationship with AÇEV is a natural outgrowth of the original research carried out in the 1980s by Çiğdem Kağıtçıbaşı, Sevda Bekman and myself, investigating the impact of a mother-education program on the cognitive and social development of preschool children from economically deprived homes. This study was one of the very few – then or now – in a

developing country to use a randomized control design to assess an intervention program, and it showed that the intervention had a positive effect on the children's school attainment and adjustment. I did not take an active part in the foundation of AÇEV, which was led by Ayşen Özyeğin, Çiğdem Kağıtçıbaşı, and Sevda Bekman, but I have served as a consultant on numerous occasions and continue on the scientific advisory board.

The foundation story is simple in its outline: Ayşen Özyeğin is a person with considerable resources and a passion for contributing to the common good. Çiğdem Kağıtçıbaşı and Sevda Bekman shared the same passion and teamed with Ayşen Hn. to implement the mother training program at the widest possible scale. This of course required quite a large organization and close coordination with government agencies. At its largest point, with the cooperation of the Ministry of Education, AÇEV was active throughout the country and over the years it has provided support to the mothers of over a million children. However, when MEB withdrew its support in order to implement its own program, AÇEV's programs shrank accordingly and are now concentrated in a few large cities. Also, AÇEV has diversified its programs to include father training, adult literacy, and work with refugee populations. The programs continue to be refined to fit changing circumstances and needs. AÇEV has also cooperated with educational groups in at least 14 other countries by supplying program content and consultation on applications of the mother-education program.

**B.B.:** Dear Diane Sunar, thank you very much for your time and for sharing your life story with me. It was an honor and a pleasure for me to get to know you better. I hope I can also have the chance to meet and study with you personally in the future.