

# “I Get to Travel a Lot and Talk to Many Really Smart and Thoughtful People”



Eiko I. Fried



**Abstract** In the interview with Eiko Fried, we discuss his career so far. Eiko shares with us some of the insights he has gained into how academia and expectations differ between countries. We also discuss the myriad of skills that are ‘useful’ in academia but cannot be mastered by a single individual, thus providing some motivation towards working in large-scale collaborations with a range of experts. Academia has many benefits including talking with brilliant people, analysing data, traveling, and teaching—but it can be difficult to treat academia as ‘just a job’ given its high workload and difficulty in securing a permanent position. Finally, remember to be kind, despite the international nature of academia; it can also seem smaller than you think.

Eiko I. Fried

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E. I. Fried (✉)  
Department Clinical Psychology, Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands  
e-mail: [e.i.fried@fsw.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:e.i.fried@fsw.leidenuniv.nl)

Can you tell us about a few more items from that list? I have found myself referring students to that list from time to time to demonstrate the breadth of directions there are to develop skills in and to show that’s unfeasible to become an expert in everything that is ‘expected’, so it would be great to hear more about it, as well as a link to the blog post..... 198

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**Chris: Can you introduce yourself and tell me a bit about your current position?**

Eiko: Hi! I’m 38 years old, was born in Germany, have lived in Germany (mainly in Munich and Berlin), Belgium (2 years), the Netherlands (4 years), and the USA (1 year, Michigan), and spent about a semester each in Norway, Finland, and the USA (Virginia). I am currently Assistant Professor in the Clinical Psychology Unit at Leiden University in the Netherlands. I simultaneously applied for a position here in the methodology group because my work takes place somewhere in between these two fields.

**What was the focus of your PhD?**

In Germany, unlike the USA, PhDs usually follow after bachelor and master’s programmes, and will commonly last 3–4 years. After finishing what was equivalent to bachelor and master’s in Munich (called a Diploma), I spent a year in Berlin at the Cluster of Excellence ‘Languages of Emotions’ as a research assistant because I had failed to get into the graduate school of that cluster. I got in the year after (you needed to apply with your own project proposal and then were assigned supervisors from the cluster after you were accepted) and took about 3.5 years to finish my PhD there, 2011–2014. I spent some of that time at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. The topic was covert heterogeneity of major depression: I studied all the ways people with depression differ from each other and showcased how studying individual symptoms on which people differ a lot—rather than the yes/no category major depression that obfuscates a lot of information—can be highly insightful. At the end of graduate school, I had one paper published, one accepted, and one

submitted. I want to mention this because I saw a discussion a few days ago on Twitter about US students in my field having on average 17 papers when they finish grad school (I did not verify this, but my CV was far from that, in any case).

### **As you were finishing your PhD, what were you thinking about your career plans?**

I wanted to stay in academia, but I'm not a good planner and took things as they came. I had become a big fan of the work of Denny Borsboom in Amsterdam, and so before finishing up my PhD, I reached out to him and asked if there may be any opportunity for some future work together. Denny had heard about my work through a mailing list we were both active on (shoutout to SEMnet) and invited me to come to Amsterdam for a few days and present my work. I then ended up applying to a postdoc position in Leuven (Belgium) that Denny told me about which he co-supervised, and to this day, I am not quite sure why they accepted me (the position was very stats heavy, and my CV didn't look great back then compared to other candidates).

### **How have your career plans changed as you've continued on to your current position?**

Despite all its challenges, I greatly enjoy working in academia. I worked hard but was also quite lucky: after my first 2 years of postdoc, I ended up not getting a grant, which, because I did not get the grant, led to another 2-year postdoc position, this time in the Netherlands in the group of Denny. I moved, and when this second postdoc ended, I really enjoyed living in the Netherlands. So I applied for two jobs at the geographically closest university, Leiden University (pro tip: it wasn't a good idea to tell them that; you're supposed to say something about how much you like the university you apply for), and ended up getting one of them. I've been there for 2.5 years now, at a place that starts feeling like a real academic home.

### **A few years ago, you wrote a blog post about the list of skills/competencies that postdocs can be expected to have. Can you tell us a bit more about that?**

I actually revisited that blog post a few days ago when I wrote a rejoinder to commentaries that had been published on a paper of mine. The idea of the paper was that we need to pay more attention to theory building and testing in my field (psychology) and many of the commentaries suggested training psychologists in math,

modelling, and philosophy to achieve that. So I collated a list of expected academic skills, expertise, and services, from, for example, job postings, university promotion guidelines, grant guidelines, and workshops on career advancement in my area. The list is exceptionally long: to give you just one of the 11 items on the list, clinical psychologists are often academics, teachers, and practicing psychotherapists all at the same time. Adding math, modelling, and philosophy to our education does not seem feasible. Instead, I suggest that we should all learn a bit of these and instead sacrifice some content that is outdated; train *some* psychologists to become theorists (like in physics, economics, or biology where theoretical subdisciplines exist); and collaborate more with interdisciplinary experts.

**Can you tell us about a few more items from that list? I have found myself referring students to that list from time to time to demonstrate the breadth of directions there are to develop skills in and to show that's unfeasible to become an expert in everything that is 'expected', so it would be great to hear more about it, as well as a link to the blog post.**

Of course, here is the blog post (<https://eiko-fried.com/are-we-asking-too-much-a-list-of-competencies-people-expect-me-to-have/>), and here (<https://doi.org/10.1080/1047840X.2020.1854011>) the paper I was referring to for which I used the blog post as an inspiration (the relevant part is in the very last section). I'm glad you're using this to normalize things a little with your own students ... it's indeed impossible to obtain expertise in all these areas.

Let me give you an example for a recent paper we wrote on student mental health under COVID-19 (<https://doi.org/10.1177/21677026211017839>), for which we queried students on smartphones multiple times per day for 2 weeks about their momentary experiences during the early stages of the pandemic. The paper requires considerable expertise for a broad range of substantive constructs we wanted to measure, ranging from depression and anxiety over well-being and anger all the way to loneliness and social isolation. In the best case, you've read books, theory papers, and systematic reviews on each of these constructs. You also need measurement expertise, especially in the context of ecological momentary assessment for which you can only ask participants a very limited set of questions (because you query them multiple times per day for many days in a row). You need technical and programming expertise to implement these questionnaires properly in the right software. You need at least some expertise in privacy and IT security in order to get this approved by your ethics committee, given that sensitive data are collected on smartphones. Then you need expertise in dynamic systems models for the analyses we did. And expertise in how to deal with missing observations in time-series data. In the review process, we received three detailed reviews, and reviewers raised

questions across all of these domains. This example also shows that the answer to proper science in these areas has to be large-scale collaborations of a range of experts.

## **Can you tell us a bit about what day-to-day life is like in your current position?**

My experience in the Netherlands is that working from home is often encouraged at universities. In my last 2.5 years as an assistant professor, I have worked from home about 2 days per week. What I do with my week depends heavily on my teaching schedule: there are times in which I pretty much only teach (last semester I was supervising 16 bachelor students and six master’s students and was additionally teaching two courses). If my teaching load is lower, in a given week, I will do the following:

- Several meetings with PhD, master’s, and bachelor students I supervise.
- One or two committee meetings in our department or faculty, e.g. for research or educational purposes.
- One or two meetings with folks from the Open Science Community Leiden and the Young Academy Leiden.
- Focused work on a manuscript, which usually means reading, analysing data, data visualization, and writing.
- Procrastinating on Twitter.
- Providing written feedback for manuscripts; this can be for friends, colleagues, co-authors, and of course also for folks I don’t know via the peer-review system.
- Many calls and email exchanges with collaborators about ongoing and future projects.
- Trying to reserve 2 hours for learning something new, but that doesn’t always work out.
- Some blogging (although this has become less frequent these days) and science communication/catching up with science news on Twitter.

## **What do you like most about your work?**

I get to travel a lot and talk to many really smart and thoughtful people. It may sound a bit cliché, but it’s incredibly rewarding for a person as curious as myself.

## **And what do you like least about your work?**

I've never been good at administrative tasks that have nothing to do with teaching or science (i.e. what I consider to be my job). Luckily, I've had jobs so far where I spent the large majority of my time on science and teaching, so I haven't struggled with this too much.

## **You've moved around between quite a few countries. Have you noticed any interesting differences between the academic systems?**

Absolutely. I'll give you two examples: the first is the meaning of academic positions. I am currently an assistant professor in the Netherlands, but here this is really just a postdoc with a higher teaching load, often with a short-term contract. It does not come with any start-up money or PhD students or having your own lab, in stark contrast to how this works in the USA. The second difference is what terms mean in the English language. I'll be overgeneralizing a little here to make the point, but good luck trying to give a Dutch student critical feedback on an assignment or thesis the way you'd do that in the USA: 'This is really great work, Jessie, but you may want to consider the possibility to perhaps work on the structure a bit.' Dutch students will consider this a 9.5/10 and not move a finger. In the USA (at least where I have taught), this is more of a 6/10. Such differences are also reflected in letters of recommendations I write (in English language) for students who want to work in the USA vs the Netherlands or the UK: using superlatives common in US letters would simply sound weird for the Dutch. A 'good student' would not be considered in the USA, but in the Netherlands, a 'good student' is, well, actually good. As someone who isn't an English native speaker, it took me quite a while to figure out these nuances.

## **Can you tell us more about how you ended up working on your PhD jointly between Berlin and Ann Arbor?**

In 2010, I was lucky enough to receive a competitive PhD grant to work at the highly interdisciplinary cluster of excellence 'Languages of Emotion'. You applied with your own project, and if it got funded, you then looked for supervisors among the faculty. There wasn't really a strong match between my topics and the faculty, so I ended up writing an email to Randolph Nesse, a professor at the University of Michigan, asking whether he'd be willing to provide feedback on my PhD thesis proposal (he had done a lot of work on my topic of interest with a previous PhD student around 2005). His response ended up in my spam filter, and my life would

have been very different had I not checked my spam filter a few days before it was emptied automatically. Randy was enthusiastic about my ideas and became my informal supervisor, and I ended up visiting Ann Arbor twice for about a semester each time.

### **If someone currently finishing their PhD was considering a position similar to yours, how might they decide if it would be a good fit?**

Some of my friends have jobs that are just that: jobs. Time spent to earn money to then have a good life outside of work. In my personal experience, academia is not a good place for ‘just-jobs’ jobs because keeping up with an academic career requires considerable motivation and time investment. I don’t want to normalize this or pretend that’s great, but I’m answering the question for academic careers as they currently are, not as I’d want them to be. Given the high workload and volatility of academic careers, I think it’s important that folks really enjoy the prospect of science and teaching. I often feel that what I am doing at university are activities I do primarily because I enjoy them: talking to brilliant people, analysing and visualizing data, traveling, teaching, learning, trying to find out what holds the universe together at its core! It can be a little much at times, but I truly enjoy all these things. Academia can be challenging, and it’s not easy to get a permanent contract. It helps if you are curious and bring with you an innate passion for science and a bit of intolerance for uncertainty.

### **Based on your journey, what advice or suggestions do you want to pass on to someone who’s currently finishing their PhD?**

Countries have very different academic systems, and different disciplines tend to have different systems as well. A good example from my own career is that I was recently assigned to be the last (i.e. least important) author on a paper by a large consortium of epidemiologists because they order by importance of contribution. That turned out to be really convenient for me because in psychology, the last author is considered the second most prominent position, implying something akin to PI status (we do first author, last author, and then second, third, fourth, etc.). So I admit I struggle with broad general advice. Maybe this: academia is much smaller than you think. You will, unexpectedly, meet the same colleagues over and over again, even if you work in a very large field. People you criticize on Twitter will end up reviewing your work. People you talk about badly at a conference dinner will have their spouse sitting at the next table. The message here is not ‘be careful what you

say in public' (although that may be a good idea), and it is certainly not 'do not be critical' or 'do not criticize others': criticism is central to science. But it is important to be fair and balanced in your criticism, focussing on the content and not the person, and that's not always easy. Assume a cockup before you assume a conspiracy. Ask for clarification if you see something that looks fishy to you: most errors in academia are honest mistakes. And in a scientific debate, try to follow Anatol Rapoport's rules, as summarized by Daniel Dennett in his book *Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking*:

1. Re-express your target's position clearly, vividly, and fairly.
2. List any points of agreement with the target.
3. List what you have learned from your target.
4. After that, your criticism, no matter how harsh on the matter of substance, will likely lead to a much more constructive debate.

I have a comic by Joey Comeau in my living room to remind me of that. It says: 'I used my one wish to make myself smarter. Smart enough to wish I was more kind.'

**Thanks so much for sharing your experiences with us. It is very much appreciated!**