

Meet the RPLP Fellows: David Johnson, Post-Doctoral Fellow

by Sabrina Toppa, Undergraduate Student, Rice University '13, Religion and Public Life Program Student Reporter

This summer, the Religion and Public Life Program welcomed David Johnson, a post-doctoral fellow with expertise in the sociology of work, science, and higher education. Dr. Johnson comes to Rice from the University of Georgia, where he completed a PhD in sociology. His dissertation, which was funded by the National Science Foundation, examined the commercialization of science. Although religion has not been a part of his past research agenda, Johnson is excited to incorporate it in his research. "I've always been intellectually interested in religion," Johnson said, "So I am very excited to be studying it right now."

Dr. Johnson has interviewed 100 scientists as part of his previous studies, which makes his expertise in qualitative methods a valuable addition to the RPLP research team. Johnson is currently in charge of analyzing and reporting the progress of sixty-eight pilot interviews for the "Religion among Scientists in International Contexts" (RASIC) advisory board. In October, Johnson will begin interviewing academic scientists in Italy. He will also conduct interviews in the United States, United Kingdom, and France in early 2013.

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Religion in Global Context

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On September 11, the Religion and Public Life Program (RPLP) hosted the Religion in Global Context panel discussion. The goal of the event, as panelist Helen Rose Ebaugh noted, was to "bring together sociologists who do cross-national research in order to answer questions and address challenges" that arise when examining religion cross-nationally. The event was moderated by the RPLP program director, Professor Elaine Howard Ecklund, and included several distinguished panelists: Professor Ebaugh of the University of Houston, Professor Chantal Saint-Blancat of the University of Padova in Italy, Professor Fenggang Yang of Purdue University, and Professor David Voas of the University of Essex in the United Kingdom. The panelists were religion scholars who came to Rice University to advise the RPLP's Religion among Scientists in International Contexts (RASIC) study.

The panelists reached consensus on the importance of using a cross-national perspective to understand the diversity of the international religious community. Yang believed American researchers should move away from thinking the United States to be an exception in regards to religion and towards recognizing the tremendous commonalities we share with other countries - something researchers can achieve only by examining a global context for religion. Saint-Blancat expressed a hope that the dissemination of results from studies like RASIC, which uses an international lens to examine issues of religion, will foster mutual understanding among future generations. (Continued on page 3.)



Professors Saint-Blancat, Ebaugh, Yang, Voas, and Ecklund discuss cross-national religion research.

Meet the RPLP Fellows: David Johnson, Post- Doctoral Fellow (continued)

Johnson's background in studying French and living in France makes him particularly suited to researching French scientists. In preparation for these interviews, Johnson said, "I am continuing to redevelop my French skills and polishing them through reading French, listening to French Podcasts, and taking French classes at Rice."

Ultimately, Johnson is excited for the opportunity to work with scholars at different places in their careers. "Another thing that's rare about this study is that in addition to the project leaders, there are fourteen undergraduates and several graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and even an advisory board," Johnson said. "This project offers a rare opportunity to contribute to, participate in, and influence a truly ambitious study. It is a tremendous professional opportunity for everyone involved, because I think this study is going to have a big scholarly impact as well as a big public impact."

Religion in Global Context (continued)

There are also many challenges to conducting cross-national research that the panelists shared. In particular, they highlighted the difficulties arising from language, political, and cultural differences. Voas emphasized the difficulty of developing a unified set of questions in a cross-national study when each question can have political and cultural implications that vary so widely among nations. Yang provided a prime example of this challenge, pointing out that certain concepts between Chinese and English face both a language and cultural barrier: there is no Chinese word for "spirituality" or "religion." In order to overcome this barrier, the panelists agreed that good research methods must be utilized. According to Ebaugh, researchers "must take time doing intensive interviews and pilot studies" in order to develop a strong set of questions that can then be confidently employed in quantitative, survey-based research. She also added, "In the end, our conclusions and results are only as good as the questions we ask."

The main point of disagreement among these scholars concerned the question of whether the presence of religion is increasing or decreasing worldwide. Ebaugh and Yang agreed that societies are increasingly taking a global perspective on religion due to the prevalence of transnational migration. Ebaugh said societies have been forced to consider and acknowledge a diverse array of religions given that "borders don't mean what they used to." Yang agreed, emphasizing the importance of studying countries outside of those in North America or Europe. Voas disagreed, however, arguing that since the world is in a state of modernization, people are less likely to recognize religion as an important aspect of daily life.

During the question and answer session, undergraduate student Kristian Edosomwan asked French native Saint-Blancat about how international research might impact her home country. "In France's case," Edosomwan said, "it's interesting that a country which claims to be secular and tolerant is banning headscarves. This was a rare opportunity to ask someone from France about it."

By the end of the panel discussion, the various scholars had discussed many of the complex problems that arise from cross-national research on religion, but also many of the solutions and efforts that exist to mitigate these difficulties. According to panelists, discussion is interesting not because of the conclusions that result, but because of the dialogue that takes place. As Ebaugh noted, "It is disagreement that makes a panel discussion so interesting; if everyone agreed, why would we talk about it?"