



Between baby and doctorate

Scientists from 100 countries work at the Max Planck Institutes. Here they write about their personal experiences and impressions. Julia Misersky, doctoral student at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen, recently started her maternity leave. Here she introduces her research topic, explains how she plans to juggle her doctoral studies with motherhood, and talks about her commitment to improving conditions for young parents.

I recently started my maternity leave, which is somewhat shorter in the Netherlands than in Germany. Pregnant employees here are only entitled to 16 weeks. I have postponed the start of my maternity leave until four weeks before the birth date so that I can spend as much time as possible with my baby after the birth. I am also still entitled to some vacation, which I will take when my maternity leave ends.

My partner will also take six weeks of unpaid vacation after the birth. As soon as we are both back at work, we will make use of the Dutch *Ouderschapsverlof*. This is a legally regulated entitlement to additional parental leave, in which employees can take unpaid vacation depending on their regular working hours.

In my research, I am interested in how various linguistic backgrounds – meaning the differences in grammar and vocabulary between various languages – influence the way in which we perceive the world around us. For my doctorate, I am investigating when and how language affects perception. To this end, we are conducting experiments in which we manipulate what the participants see, when they see it, and for how long.



Julia Misersky, 30, studied psychology at the University of Sussex. After obtaining her Bachelor's degree, she switched to Radboud University in Nijmegen and completed a Master's degree in cognitive neuroscience. In November 2016, she joined the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen, where she is working for her doctorate in the Neurology of Language Department under Director Peter Hagoort. Julia Misersky represents the Humanities, Social and Human Sciences Section of the Max Planck Society's PhDnet platform.

We try to design our experiments in line with the way in which people perceive the world on a daily basis. We do this by using virtual reality methods, for example. Moreover, the participants have different linguistic backgrounds. This means that we can analyze how their respective native languages influence, how the participants perceive the world, how they evaluate specific situations, and how their brains react to certain stimuli. So far I have used eye tracking and neuronal imaging techniques for this purpose.

Our baby will start daycare at the crèche at the age of just three or four months – but only for two days a week. The situation isn't ideal compared to the standards we are familiar with from Germany, but it's a compromise we can both live with.

The fact that everyone at my Institute reacted with incredible understanding and is very supportive is tremendously encouraging. My supervisor, for example, who has just had her second child, and the administrative staff have helped me out wherever they could. They told me about the legal situation in the Netherlands as regards work and parental leave and explained the childcare facilities offered by the Max Planck Society, the MPS *Schnullerprogramm* (childcare program).

I am aware that my situation cannot necessarily be applied to others. In recent months, I have gathered information on the experiences of many other doctoral students on this topic – both positive and negative. Reconciling parenthood and career is ranked high on the agenda of this year's PhDnet Steering Group, which is why we have set up a working group in cooperation with the General Administration. I am optimistic that the results will help make doctoral studies and parenthood reconcilable options for everyone involved.

After my maternity leave, I still have a few years in which to complete my doctorate. For this reason, I can't yet say what will happen afterwards. First of all, I will find out what it means to have a family. Time will tell what happens next.