

Personality of the Month

In every issue we introduce a special person from a minority ethnic background, who has made a positive impact in the Northern Ireland society. In this issue, we present Dr. Paulo Sousa.



Dr. Paulo Sousa

One of three children, Paulo Sousa was born in Brasília, the capital of Brazil. Growing up his dream was to follow in his father's footsteps and become a footballer. He nurtured this dream, dedicating all his free time to playing football, until he started university where he majored in Mining Engineering, then switched to Social Anthropology with a minor in Philosophy "because of an interest in the interplay between what is universal and particular in human beings". After completing an MA in Cognitive Science in Paris, Paulo moved to the University of Michigan to undertake a PhD in Anthropology, with a specialisation in Cognition and Culture.

Paulo came to Belfast in 2006 just after he finished his PhD, as an international fellow of the Institute of Cognition and Culture, which is part of the School of History and Anthropology at Queen's University Belfast. "Then, during my first year at the Institute of Cognition and Culture, they opened a permanent position. And here I am."

Not only is Paulo a strong academic, he is also a published poet inspired by the Brazilian "Concrete Poetry" movement.

Which part of Brazil are you from?

I was born in Brasília, the Capital of Brazil.

Do you have brothers and sisters?

I have two younger sisters. My parents have already passed away.

What profession did you dream of, when you were a child?

As many Brazilians, my dream was to be a football player. My father was a football player for a while. So, I was strongly influenced not only by the overall cultural environment but also by my father. But I have to say that I indeed played very well. So, it wasn't simply an unrealistic dream. I kept this dream till I was around seventeen years old, when I started to move in other directions.

Growing up, what were your hobbies?

When I was growing up, most of my "free" time was dedicated to play football. When I was growing up, my main aim in life was to be a football player. This was what I liked to do most.

What made you choose your profession?

It is a somewhat long story. When I first entered the university, it was to study Mining Engineering. However, this was during a critical political moment of Brazil (the transition from military dictatorship to democracy) and universities were one of the important political hotspots. I became involved with the Workers' Party (PT) and decided to change my studies from Mining Engineering to Social Sciences. Then, I decided to specialise in social anthropology, because of an interest in the interplay between what is universal and particular in human beings. I had a BA in social anthropology with a minor in philosophy, and an MA in social anthropology. Because I was particularly influenced by cognitive anthropologists, who see anthropology and psychology as two complementary fields of inquiry, I went to France to do an MA in cognitive science under the supervision of Dan Sperber, who is a cognitive anthropologist. After my time in Paris, I went to the University, I went to the University of Michigan and had my PhD



O OVO
 É UM NOVO NO OVO
 O NOVO É UMA VIDA NO OVO
 UMA VIDA TEM OLHOS NO OVO
 UM OVO AVISTA O VAZIO DA VIDA
 UM OVO É UM NOVO OVO NO OVO
 O NOVO É MAIS UMA VIDA NO OVO
 OS OLHOS AVISTAM DOIS OVOS
 UM OVO REPETE O VAZIO DA VIDA
 UMA VIDA ENTRE DOIS VAZIOS
 HÁ BEM NO MEIO DO OVO
 O VAZIO NO OVO É
 O NOVO

This poem, which has the form of an egg and is called “OVO NO OVO” (“egg in the egg”), is about the meaning of life, or rather about life’s absence of meaning. The poem plays semiotically with the shape of the Portuguese words “OVO” (“egg”), “NO” (“in the”), “NOVO” (“new” or “novelty”), and the letter “V” of the words “VIDA” (“life”) and “VAZIO” (“void”). Thus, it cannot be completely translated without losing much of its significance. Keeping in mind the meanings of the aforementioned Portuguese words, here is a partial translation: The OVO/is a NOVO NO OVO/the NOVO is a life NO OVO/a life has eyes NO OVO/an OVO sees the void of life/an OVO is a NOVO OVO NO OVO/the NOVO is another life NO OVO/the eyes see two OVOS/an OVO repeats the void of life/a life between two voids/exists right in the middle of the OVO/The void NO OVO is/the NOVO.

Personality of the Month (continued)

in anthropology, with a specialisation in Cognition and Culture. I came to Belfast in 2006 just after I finished my PhD, as an international fellow of the Institute of Cognition and Culture, which is part of the School of History and Anthropology at Queen's University. Then, during my first year at the Institute of Cognition and Culture, they opened a permanent position. And here I am.

Who has inspired you most in your life?

It is difficult to single out specific persons. I'm a published poet and sometimes also do public performances with poetry. My book of poetry is called "Sousa Quase Sósia" ("Sousa Quasi Double"). In my poetry, I've been inspired by a Brazilian movement called "Concrete Poetry", in which the shape and arrangement of words is as important in conveying meaning as the meaning of words, their rhythm and rhyme. The poem "OVO NO OVO" published here illustrates this type of "Concrete Poetry". In my scientific work, I've been inspired by those cognitive anthropologists and cognitive scientists who are really capable of pursuing interdisciplinary research in a fecund way. I have had a very good education in philosophy too, and the philosophical tradition has always influenced me to a great extent. In this respect, I'm particularly inspired by the level of "mathematical" precision of some analytic philosophers.

Do you have a favourite research?

I've always had a broad range of research interests and have published articles on a variety of topics—from linguistic theories of quotations to folk biology. But my current research interests focus on agency and moral psychology as well as their relation to religion. For example, I'm interested in how people think about culpability and wrongdoing.

What do you like most about Northern Ireland?

People. They are so friendly and receptive.

In this issue, we have an article that talks about OCD. Could you tell us about the connection between OCD and superstitious beliefs?

There is an intrinsic relation between OCD and superstitious beliefs. People with obsessive-compulsive disorder tend to have recurrent intrusive thoughts about the occurrence of bad outcomes, and they tend to believe that just thinking about the occurrence of a bad outcome increases the probability of its occurrence, which is a superstition and a major source of their distress.

Do you think the areas of science you work with are honoured equally in different parts of the world?

I left Brazil because there is no cognitive anthropology in Brazil.

After living in other countries, do you see Brazil in a different light?

I've been leaving outside Brazil since 1997, when I went to Paris to do a MA in cognitive science. Then, I spent seven years in the United States doing my PhD at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. I've been in Belfast for almost 8 years now. After all these years, I still see Brazil in the same light—a wonderful place to be or to visit. However, I wouldn't move back to Brazil, since I love my career and it wouldn't be possible to develop my career in Brazil.

If someone goes to Brazil, which places should he/she visit?

Brazil is a huge country with many interesting places to visit. Rio, Sao Paulo, Salvador, the many lovely Brazilian beaches.

The cognitive science of religion is one of the major areas of the Institute of Cognition and Culture at Queen's University. Could you mention some of the important contribution that this field can provide to the society? Could you give a brief example of where this research has helped in the society?

The Institute of Cognition and Culture (see information on our webpage: <http://www.qub.ac.uk/schools/InstituteofCognitionCulture/>), of which I'm the current Director, has had since its inception a strong connection with research in the field of the cognitive science of religion. One of the topics of study is the role of ritual and sacred values in establishing in-group cooperation and inter-group conflict. The ICC is collaborating with two of the most prolific anthropologists on this topic (Scott Atran and Harvey Whitehouse). For example, recent evidence suggests that sacred values block the instrumental reasoning (the simple calculation of costs and benefits) present in much ordinary decision-making processes, making peace negotiations intractable and making people more willing to accept violent behaviour in defence of these values. When evaluating a hypothetical peace agreement requiring compromise over their sacred values, individuals find the agreement less appealing when it involves exchanging their sacred values for material benefits because they see this type of exchange as immoral. Rather than material offers, this research suggests that symbolic concessions like apologies may be much more efficacious in moving intractable conflicts towards more peaceful resolutions. This type of research has various implications for decision making in the context of conflict resolution.