

What I Learned Along the Way

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The April column includes recollections from two luminaries, **Herman Aguinis** and **Kevin Murphy**. Herman describes the long path from childhood to “elite” status—and more importantly from Argentina to America. Kevin describes the equally daunting trip from faculty status to department head status. Each, in his own way, highlights the importance of tolerance as a personality characteristic and the role of I-O in his personal and professional life. Sometimes it is not clear whether an individual chooses a path or the path chooses the individual. Most of the time, it doesn’t matter.

From Río Cuarto to Denver

Herman Aguinis
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I was born in 1966 in the town of Río Cuarto in the Province of Córdoba (Argentina). In Spanish, Río Cuarto means “Fourth River.” I recall how my parents used to tell me that the Spanish Conquistadors had lacked creativity and therefore had been unable to come up with more interesting names for the rivers in the Province. Instead, they used “first,” “second,” “third,” “fourth,” and “fifth” as labels as they progressed Southward in their conquest. The town where I was born happened to be on the banks of the fourth river, and hence its name.

During most of the 1960s and 1970s, Argentina was ruled by dictators who enjoyed imposing arbitrary regulations on businesses, education, and many other organizations and areas of life. For example, there was a list of names parents had to use to choose their children’s names. Parents were not allowed to use a name that was not included in the list. This resulted in my parents choosing “Herman” for me, a name included on the list, which was the closest to the intended name Hersh. Hersh was the name of my great-grandfather, a Jew who was killed together with his wife, two daughters, and entire extended family by the Nazis during the Holocaust. Hersh’s son, my grandfather José, was the only Aguinis who survived the Holocaust by fleeing Europe for Argentina.

In addition to the list of names, another such arbitrary policy in some provinces was that children were required to learn how to read and write using block letters and not cursive handwriting. When I was 10, my family moved to the city of Buenos Aires. Much to my surprise, I showed up at my new school and realized that cursive was used, I was unable to write, and I was able to read only with great difficulty! Not a good surprise when you are 10 to find out you can barely read and write. As a consequence of this, my handwriting still suffers and my students, and even myself, have a hard time reading what I write.

When I was 12, I took a 2-day exam including Spanish, Geography, History, and Mathematics. Results of this exam determined whether I would be able to attend a school including grades 8 to 13 that were part of the University of Buenos Aires system. The top 30% of scorers were accepted and, fortunately, I was one of them. Attending this prestigious high school, founded in 1772, was the most meaningful educational experience I had in Argentina.

It was also during my high school days that the military dictatorship kidnapped and murdered thousands of people, including some students in my school, for being “subversive.” I was part of an underground student movement that created a student association and a newsletter. A student from my school, who was about 17 years old, was kidnapped as he was picking up an issue of the newsletter from the printer and was never seen again. He became one of the notorious “desaparecidos” (missing people). The dictatorship lasted from 1976 to 1983, and my father, who is a physician and writer and was a vocal voice of opposition against the dictatorship and in favor of democracy and individual rights, risked becoming a desaparecido himself. One night, he and my mother returned from the movie theater to see a police car parked at the door of our apartment building. My three siblings and I were sleeping in the apartment and my parents did not dare to enter the building until several hours later when the police car left. They never knew whether the car was waiting to take them away as soon as they showed up. But, the head of the writers’ association of Río Cuarto was told by the local Chief of Police that they had been unable to arrest my father there because he had “fled to Buenos Aires.”

I came to the United States for the first time when I was 13. I spent 3 months living with my aunt, uncle, and three cousins in Staten Island (New York City). I played football on the street, played basketball at the local Jewish Community Center, ate cereal for breakfast, saw the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, listened to The Grateful Dead, and watched *Happy Days* on TV. Most importantly, I developed a great admiration for the democratic system in the U.S. and the respect for human liberty. I knew the political and economic systems were not perfect, but I was convinced they were vastly superior to those of the majority of countries in the world. It was then that I decided I would eventually live in the U.S.

Back in high school in Argentina, at the Colegio Nacional de Buenos Aires, I was exposed to the usual courses, with the advantage that they were taught by University of Buenos Aires faculty using university textbooks, plus advanced Latin, Physics, Chemistry, Astronomy, History, and Calculus. When I graduated at age 18, I decided I would pursue a career in the social sciences and was ready to go to college in the U.S. However, I was unable to do so because it was too expensive. Thus, I decided to attend college in Argentina as quickly as possible so I could go to the U.S. for a graduate degree. I attended the University of Buenos Aires and graduated in 1988 with a BA and master’s in clinical psychology, the only psychology specialty

available at that time. By then, Argentina had regained a democratic system and, in addition to attending college, I was working full time for a federal organization in charge of helping democratize organizations ranging from labor unions to student clubs at universities. It was a monumental organizational change effort in the entire country.

Half way through my college years in Argentina, I contacted over 100 universities in the U.S. via mail and found out about I-O psychology. I remember being elated each time I received a new catalog in the mail. I spent a whole summer reading catalogs and program descriptions from back to back. I was surprised about how prompt and professional most universities were compared to universities in Argentina regarding their dealing with potential doctoral students. I-O psychology was very appealing to me because it seemed such a broad field. I could foresee studying many different and interesting topics ranging from leadership to job design.

I applied to universities near New York City (to be close to my aunt, uncle, and cousins) and decided to attend SUNY-Albany. This school was only a 3-hour drive from my relatives and it offered a tuition waiver and stipend. Coming from Argentina, the \$8,000/year stipend seemed like a fortune! I had never taken a course in I-O psychology until arriving in Albany because I-O psychology courses were not available in Argentina. But, I was up to speed very quickly thanks to the faculty members there at the time, **Eugene F. Stone-Romero**, **Kevin J. Williams**, and George M. Alliger. It was only after being in Albany for about 2 years that I realized that the presence of knowledgeable, experienced, and well-connected faculty is probably the most important factor in having a good graduate school experience.

I also had weekly research meetings with James T. Tedeschi, a renowned social psychologist interested in power and influence. I was interested in power because I had had so little of it growing up in a dictatorial political system. Jim, who passed away a couple of years ago, was an outstanding teacher and had an open door policy that made working with him a delightful experience. He also taught me to treat students with respect simply because this is the right thing to do. At SUNY-Albany, I had a great time talking about research with classmates such as **Chuck Pierce** over countless beers and playing flag football on weekends in the bitter Albany winter weather and tennis in the hot and sticky summer weather. I still count many of those classmates as close friends.

At SUNY-Albany, I became very interested in research methodology and, since taking my first-semester statistics course, I decided to learn as much methodology as possible because I concluded I would not become a good scientist without this knowledge. I still believe in the centrality of research methodology and try to learn as much about methods as possible, for example, by attending workshops and serving as a reviewer for the SIOP conference.

I completed my master's and PhD degrees in 4 years and went on the job market in the spring of 1993. I sent out over 70 applications but received

interview offers from only three or four universities. I decided to accept an offer from the Psychology Department at the University of Colorado at Denver, primarily because **Kurt Kraiger** was there at the time. The fact that he had been there for about a decade, and built his career there, gave me hope that I would be able to do the same despite the lack of a doctoral program. I spent 4 excellent years there but was about to leave for a psychology department in a university on the East Coast when I received a call from **Wayne Cascio** in the Business School at the University of Colorado at Denver telling me they had an opening and asking if I was interested. I love Colorado because of its weather, skiing, and mountain biking. So, I went through the interview process, received an offer, and decided to switch over to the Business School within the same university instead of returning to the East Coast. Wayne had been at the university since the early 1980s and spent the majority of his career there. His impressive career trajectory provided some reassurances vis-à-vis the advice of some colleagues that I should not move to a business school because of the supposed lack of research orientation and the warnings that moving to a business school would be a career killer.

The move from psychology to business was not smooth because the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences was not happy about the dean from the Business School “stealing” his faculty. Those were very stressful and sleepless nights. Although I knew the fight was not about me in particular, I was caught in the middle of a political battle. I knew the deans would have fought over a piece of furniture or any other thing perceived to be an asset (tangible or intangible). In the end things calmed down and the Arts and Sciences dean understood there was nothing he could do after the university chancellor spoke personally with him. Otherwise, the move was very easy and did not disrupt my work at all. I did not even have to change my phone number or e-mail address.

Topics traditionally researched by I-O psychologists have been part of my life since an early age. I experienced lack of justice due to the Argentine military dictatorship. I experienced discrimination and minority status in Argentina for being Jewish. I experienced the need to retrain myself when I was 10 and was unable to read and write well. I experienced selection issues when I took a rigorous entrance exam at age 12 that would dictate my next 10 years of schooling. I experienced organizational change by working on a massive organizational and country-wide change project. I am personally familiar with cross-cultural issues because I was not born in the U.S. and had to learn another language, and I have also experienced subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) discrimination in the U.S. for being Hispanic. I-O psychology is so broad that it gives me great choice in terms of research topics. In fact, I define myself more as a social scientist than as an I-O psychologist. I have conducted research in such diverse topics as conflict resolution tactics, perceptions of adopted children, personnel selection, nonverbal behaviors and power, meta-analysis, interaction effects, advancement of female executives, validity gen-

eralization, cross-cultural organizational behavior, virtual reality, ethics in research, workplace romance, and sexual harassment, among others. I-O psychology gives me the freedom to explore many topics from many different perspectives. Most importantly, as my former advisor Gene Stone-Romero used to say frequently, “In how many jobs do people get paid to learn?”

It’s been a long road from Río Cuarto to Denver. There were numerous unexpected turns such as receiving a doctoral degree in Albany and ending up in a business school. What’s next? It’s hard to tell. What I try to do is maximize the opportunities that open up after each career decision. This has worked well for me and has given me the flexibility and autonomy to do what I like to do and, amazingly, get paid for it!