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# Interdisciplinarity of the Study of Religions at Masaryk University: Goals and Expectations According to the Heads of CEDRR, LEVYNA, and DISSINET<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

While scrolling through the webpage of the Department for the Study of Religions at Masaryk University, three research initiatives – CEDRR, LEVYNA, and DISSINET – quickly become prominent. All of them share a distinct interdisciplinary approach to research. Given their significance to our department, we decided to conduct interviews to explore how each one works. The interview consists of three separate blocks, each with the director of one of the initiatives – Tomáš Glomb (CEDRR), David Zbírál (DISSINET), and Martin Lang (LEVYNA).

CEDRR, or the Centre for the Digital Research of Religion, was founded in 2019 and is currently headed by Tomáš Glomb, who took over from the previous director, David Zbírál, in 2022. The centre specializes in computational methods applied to the research of religion and has twenty members under three main projects – CEMRAM (now freshly concluded), DISSINET and CoRe. One of the projects conducted by the respective researchers was also GEHIR from which the whole CEDRR originated (see the interview for more information). CEDRR uses a methodology of quantitative text analysis and computational approaches such as network analysis, geographic information science, and agent-based modelling. The centre mainly focuses on pre-industrial history, including ancient religious cults and medieval history.

The Laboratory for the Experimental Research of Religion, also known as LEVYNA, is a research centre that was founded in 2011. The current director of the centre is Martin Lang, who has held the position since 2022 after the previous leader, Radek Kundt, left to become the director of the Department for the Study of Religions. The centre has currently ten members, and its primary focus is on evolutionary and cognitive approaches to studying religion. This research involves questions about the deep evolutionary history of human ritual behaviour, about mechanisms through which religious beliefs and behaviours affect intragroup cooperation or about the relationship between anxiety and ritualized behaviour. The projects currently conducted under LEVYNA are Signaler Psychology, Explaining

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<sup>1</sup> The interview with Martin Lang, head of the LEVYNA Centre, was conducted in person on 11 April 2024. The interview with David Zbírál, principal investigator of the DISSINET project, was conducted in person on 8 April 2024. The interview with Tomáš Glomb, head of the CEDRR, was conducted via MS Teams on 18 April 2024.

the Rise of Non-theism, Revisiting Feeling of Threat and Agency Detection, and Computing Religious Devotion (CREDO).

DISSINET, or the Dissident Networks Project, is a research initiative hosted under CEDRR but partly maintaining its independence. The project was initially founded through the EXPRO grant (by Czech Science Foundation) in 2019 and, in 2021, was awarded the ERC Consolidator grant which will last until 2026. The lead author and principal investigator is David Zbiral, who founded the project. DISSINET has seventeen members who primarily focus on relations and interactions in medieval heresy inquisitions. The methodology involves computational techniques such as social network analysis, geographic information science, and computational text analysis.

We conducted three separate interviews, with leaders of these initiatives, where we asked similar questions on the topics of organisational changes and challenges for leaders, the core content of the research centres and job description, opportunities for student involvement, specific projects of research centres and future prospects of research centres.

**CEDRR: Mgr. Tomáš Glomb, Ph.D.**

**In 2022, CEDRR underwent what has been called a *translatio imperii* or a transmission of rule. How did the shift from David Zbiral, who went on to focus his efforts towards DISSINET, to you, change your academic life, if it did? How do you handle the position of leading a centre that hosts such projects as DISSINET and CEMRAM to name a few? What does it take to oversee such a diverse and varied community of researchers?**

Assuming the leadership of CEDRR was a fundamental change to my academic efforts because previously I was mainly oriented on my research and was leading smaller research groups and projects. When you are the head of a research centre, the focus shifts away from you and you need to provide a collaborative environment and support for other researchers and members. You need to support them in their own efforts. It was a big change for me, but I like to expand my experience portfolio, and I am happy in this position. I like the challenge.

In the beginning, it was difficult to take the leadership and then suddenly decide where we should go from there, it was a bit abstract to me. But what helped tremendously was identifying individual segments/goals and focusing on fulfilling them. The crucial part of CEDRR is a triangle of roles consisting of networking, research, and education. These are the main aspects that I am trying to boost and support, and they are mutually interconnected. With respect to networking, I would like for CEDRR to be part of both Czech and international communities that are shaping the digital humanities or quantitative approaches in the study of religions. That is why we are organising workshops or conference panels and why CEDRR is a member of the Czech Association of Digital Humanities. Then research, that is relatively straightforward. The role of CEDRR is to support its members in applying for grants and when they already have projects, we try to promote their research and provide a collaborative environment, so the research is

easier to do. And finally, we are at a university, so it is very natural that the know-how should not be exclusive to us. We try to provide education and knowledge in our approaches and put it into the curriculum of the Department for Study of Religions. So far, we have courses for the MA program, but we are also preparing a course for BA students next year.

In CEDRR there are some projects with their own funding. They have principal investigators (PIs) who have the money to do their research. My role is not to hinder them excessively. I certainly do not want to micromanage them because they have their own hierarchy, and it would be ineffective for me to intrude. I can help in promoting their research by helping them administratively and providing them with opportunities for sharing and receiving feedback. What I would highlight is that my role in CEDRR is mainly supportive, with some administrative parts that are not fun to do but are important.

**CEDRR uses digital and computational technologies to research religion in historical-comparative and socio-economical methods utilising quantitative approaches. Could you perhaps elaborate exactly on what CEDRR does? What stood behind its establishment and what forms the relevance for a digital approach to a field such as the study of religions?**

Sometimes you have research problems that are too complex and involve too many variables to be disentangled by only one researcher's brain. For example, imagine you are trying to explore how cults in the ancient Mediterranean were spreading geographically. All sorts of potential factors could have impacted this spread, such as maritime trade, wars, politics, climate changes, the spread of infectious diseases and so on. For one single researcher, it is impossible to determine which of these factors were impactful in the spreading of ancient religious traditions. So sometimes we need to outsource our computational capacities to mathematical models. If we parameterize those factors, we can build a mathematical model that is able to determine which factors explain the spread of some cults better than others. That is what we do at CEDRR, we analyse geographical space, social networks and textual materials.

The general rule is that we are translating our research problems in a form that allows for mathematical evaluation. We are quantifying our research problems. This brings several beneficial aspects because if you are transforming your research into mathematics, you are suddenly closer to natural sciences. You are closer to effectively doing interdisciplinarity and when you publish such research and include all your data, scripts and equations, you also gain aspects of replicability and transparency. I am not saying that all research problems should be quantified. What I am trying to say is that we should work on a synergy between traditional or qualitative approaches and quantitative approaches.

About the establishment of CEDRR. It is connected in one part to a larger development in academia and that was the rise of digital humanities. In the last decade, there was a huge increase in data that is available online in digital form. Digitalization is constantly increasing so we are more and more able to approach our topics by using digital data. That is the bigger development where CEDRR is a part of a larger trend in academia. But if we investigate the micro context at the

level of Masaryk University, there, CEDRR was sort of a follow-up to the Generative Historiography of Religion (GEHIR) project. It was the first interdisciplinary project, where we were working on the topic of the spread of ancient religions. We worked with geographers, mathematicians, and computer scientists. It affected several members of the Department for the Study of Religions in such a way that we are still thinking along those lines that we developed in GEHIR. And since it affected us in such a fundamental way, establishing the research centre was a very natural thing to do. And then at some point, David Zbíral, the former head of CEDRR got the ERC project which also helped tremendously to put us on the map, and further solidify why CEDRR should exist.

**On your website, you advertise “CEDRR for students”, where you give students, whose own interests align with the specialisation of your centre, a chance to learn, work, grow and expand their expertise. Could you tell us more about this opportunity? What led you to open CEDRR up for students? Or was that the idea from the start?**

This idea emerged relatively early after I became the head of CEDRR. It was a natural answer to the question of how we can support students in the study of religions who are already trying to approach their research topics and theses by using quantitative methods. This shape of “CEDRR for students” resulted from a brainstorming with Tomáš Hampejs who is a core figure in the new concepts in CEDRR. And “CEDRR for students” is a constantly living institution. We are still trying to find new ideas, and new concepts that could help students of all degrees who are thinking of doing or already are doing quantitative research. We want to be beneficial for CEDRR students and not take away a lot of their time. That is why we mainly offer them consultations or guidance. They ask us, and we can provide a platform for their ideas. We also do guest lectures and workshops where we try to show the basics of some of these quantitative methods to inspire them. But as I said, it is a living body, and we are still trying to come up with new ideas. For example, last year we did an experiment that was called “a writing retreat”, where in the winter we went to Černá Hora near Brno to a cabin and somewhat secluded ourselves from the harsh realities of everyday life dedicating one whole day to just writing our own stuff. We had days segmented into several writing slots that were an hour or an hour and a half long and we wrote parts of our own theses or research. It was very productive to have this dedicated time, and it will be our yearly tradition from now on. It was team building as well and I am happy about that. We are starting to have a community of CEDRR members and this semester for example we are trying a new team-building activity – monthly game nights.

Students of all degrees are welcome. It is completely voluntary to be a CEDRR student and it should not be too intrusive on their time. Anyone with a topic or approach can email me and ask, then we can talk about it more.

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**Since the genesis of CEDRR in 2019 it has been the home for many projects focused on studying religion through a digital lens. Could you briefly summarise the biggest projects and tell us how they have evolved since their beginnings? Also, what are the future ambitions for CEDRR? Do you perhaps expect new projects in the near future?**

Now CEDRR has two ongoing projects with the third project being freshly concluded. The biggest project is within the ERC consolidator grant called Dissident Networks Project or DISSINET. The project conclusion should be in 2026. Now they are in the second half, and we can expect most of their research to be published in the upcoming years. They are also focusing on developing software for tracking written sources which can be used by other researchers who are focusing on the quantitative analysis of written texts. We also recently concluded the so-called CEMRAM project which is short for “Cultural Evolution of Moralizing Religions in the Ancient Mediterranean” where I was a co-principal investigator with Vojtěch Kaše from the University of West Bohemia. We asked the question “Under which circumstances in ancient history can we start to see morality emerge in ancient religions?” and analysed ancient inscriptions and coinage. This project is now over, but we are still waiting for some articles and chapters to be published.

Finally, several members of CEDRR are part of the project Beyond Security: Role of Conflict in Resilience-Building (CoRe). This is a huge cross-institutional project which is part of the Johannes Amos Comenius Programme (OP JAK). It is led by Charles University, and we are institutional partners here trying to contribute with a diverse perspective. Aleš Chalupa and I are experts on ancient historiography. We are trying to explore the patterns of resilience in religious communities in the ancient Mediterranean. Again, some members of DISSINET are there, focusing on the mediaeval part. And then we also have Tereza Menšíková focusing more on the contemporary era. This is a big and new project we are starting to orient ourselves in and it lasts until 2028 which means that for roughly five years, we are relatively safe with some of the research branches. But we would definitely like to always have some research projects because this is what brings a lot of funding for the research output to make publications and so on. I think the majority of CEDRR members have full drawers with ideas of what to do in the future.

**I would like to ask about one of your former projects, GEHIR. GEHIR was focused on ancient Mediterranean religions and their historiographical study enhanced with network science and mathematical and computational modelling. In 2016, as part of this project, you started developing a game dubbed Gods on the Barge with the goal of making your research more attractive. How is the development of the game going eight years later, have you made any progress? Do you plan to implement more interactive ways to make your research more accessible/attractive?**

Gods on the Barge is a great game and I am very proud of it. It was mainly developed by Adam Mertel, a geographer and now a member of DISSINET and it is and forever will be in a playable beta version. I play it from time to time and we also will implement this game into the new BA course. It is more of a simulator than

a narratively structured game, but it is supposed to show you and make you think about the factors of cultural transmission. The basics are that you are trying to spread Egyptian cults from ancient Alexandria to islands or coasts in the Hellenistic period which is a topic that we were focusing on in GEHIR and we published some articles about. In the game, you send ships from Alexandria elsewhere and those ships sail across the transportation network. As they are travelling, they are unloading grain because grain was one of the main exported goods of ancient Egypt, and when the grain is being unloaded, there is a chance that your cult will spread. There is a simple demographic model behind it. There are also political aspects to it, for example, you can vote where your ship will sail, and you earn money for the grain. You can select from several cults – Isis, Serapis, Anubis or Bastet and you compete against a computer which has its own ships trying to spread different cults. It is a demographic race. But to not only make it a rigid simulation we also implemented some fun into it. There is magic involved, that is where the game diverts from historical reality. Each cult that you select has a different spell that you can use. However, because Adam was busy, the game's development halted after GEHIR. However, this idea of gamifying research has stayed prevalent in CEDRR. Most of us are either board games or PC game nerds, so with Tomáš Hampejs, we have been brainstorming and gamifying certain aspects of academic life. Lately, we have brainstormed about creating an interactive web-based game-book that would help students understand the website of the Department for the Study of Religions. Hopefully, it will see the light of the day at some point. In the future, we would also want to do a course that would combine the study of religion and computer games or role-playing games.

**In the past, CEDRR has offered several talks, lectures and workshops for the general public. What led you to this decision of transparency in research, and what has been the public reaction to these events? Is it possible to expect more workshops on a similar basis from CEDRR in the future? Can you outline what we can look forward to?**

We mostly do public lectures for the faculty audience. I think that a truly public outreach is something that we have some gaps in, and we need to push forward this agenda. We have been in interviews sometimes or been guests on podcasts, but we still need to develop this more. Concerning the outreach within the Faculty of Arts, we have really good relationships with several departments, mostly with the Department of Classical Studies. We also still have friends from geography and mathematics since GEHIR times. But our goal is to push more into public outreach. In the future, we want to continue having guest lectures on an international level as well as Czech guest speakers. So far, we have been focusing more on quantitative approaches in historiography in our selection of guest lectures and workshops, but I would like to move outside of history and invite experts on social networks analysis or contemporary research problems. This semester there should be a workshop on how to work with geographical information systems for students who would like to put their data on a map and have zero experience with how to do so. It can open your imagination to what you can do with data when you see them on a map.

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**DISSINET: doc. PhDr. David Zbíral, Ph.D.**

**The position of principal investigator (PI) and lead author in an academic project must be incredibly challenging. Could you tell us where you saw the gap that led to the creation of DISSINET? What does it take to organise a group of researchers under one cause and keep an academic project alive for so long?**

The knowledge gap was, primarily, data-oriented history. In the second half of the twentieth century, the *École des Annales* recognised the potential of computational approaches. After some time, however, more historical-anthropological and qualitative approaches went to the fore. We thought that these vocations and calls for digital approaches to humanities from the 1960s have faded, and so, we wanted to build upon the tradition of social scientific history informed by computational data analysis. There was also an institutional gap. The study of heresy and inquisition was a big thing in the '70s and the '80s. You could not talk about the history of Christianity without mentioning heresy. However, later on, these topics took a back seat. As there are fashions in style, there are fashions in research, and so, the topic of heresy and inquisition is not as powerful as it used to be and thus, we wanted to bring it to the fore once again.

Talking about leading a team; it takes a lot to organise one. Of course, there is a big difference between organising a team of five people and a team of ten, twelve or more people. The difference is not linear in this case, ten is not the double of five. There are many dynamics in the team, more coordination is needed, also this being an ambitious project raises the bar even higher. What we also needed to accept was making mistakes, the responsibility for our decisions and the reality that some great people did not fit perfectly in the team and that some decided to leave. Also, it is not that much about good or bad decisions but path dependency. You decide on assigned positions but then you find out that you would have also benefited from some other positions. You decide on people but some of them leave because they found a project which suits them better. I would say that it is also about accepting this uncertainty and the possibility of the laboratory being blown into the air and living with it, which is stressful. You need to accept the condition of freefall and still enjoy it. You still have the "astronaut's suit", so you are not completely without protection. There is a lot of anchoring around the place, our project sits comfortably within the structure of, first CEDRR, then the department, the faculty, and the university, but it is still a freefall. Uncertainty is the main challenge that you need to accept.

**In a former interview for *Sacra* (1/2019), you briefly touched upon the question about your workload and responsibilities as both a DISSINET PI/researcher and teacher at the Department for the Study of Religions.**



**What are the challenges of a position such as yours? Are you planning to shift your focus towards teaching again in the coming years?**

The answer to this began a little already when I mentioned the idea of freefall and accepting uncertainty. Another challenge is work/life/sleep balance because it takes a lot of time to organize a team and still do research yourself. This has certainly been challenging. There is also a big responsibility. It is a prestigious project, one of a dozen that the university has got so far, and so you want it to go well. You also want your colleagues to develop and build their CVs in the project so that their work here is not just a strange gap in their career but a good opportunity to get some nice publications out. Another challenge for me is accepting that you cannot do everything yourself, even if you feel like you could. There is simply too much to attend to. You need to distribute, get approval from people, and get the whole organism going somehow. You also must accept some division of labour, division of responsibility, which for me is difficult. I am the kind of person who likes to do things on their own. But that is something you simply cannot do in a project where there is so much involved when it comes to managing the team. For example, when I was devising the project, I counted on doing the same amount of data collection as any historian on the team. But it turned out to not be realistic. Some people do it much better because they have fewer distractions or perhaps just better discipline.

My current position is indeed more about research than teaching. I still try to keep some links, however. Just recently I was co-devising a new course for the PhD studies, and I supervised MA and PhD programs, so I never got truly separated from that. I enjoy supervising theses, and not only PhD but all degrees. If someone comes up with a topic that is about data and the history of Christianity, I never turn them down. Now, in terms of returning to teaching, my current commitment to the ERC project is until 2026, then there is also a follow-up project CoRe under the OP JAK program which will last until 2028. Until then I will not have many opportunities of assuming a considerable amount of teaching. After 2028 however, there is uncertainty. It is, jokingly speaking, somewhat similar to a recluse, a criminal returning to normal society and seeing how things have changed. I would like to supervise more theses of all degrees. I would also try to develop what I started doing in my more active teaching period which was devising courses that have some online visibility. For instance, I put together a course which was called Christianity on Wikipedia, where instead of essays, we wrote entries on Wikipedia.

**When officially finishing your hiring processes as part of the ERC Consolidator Grant, you have built a ten-strong team of highly competent researchers. With the addition of many other members over the years, their expertise spanning from research to technical and management support, DISSINET now boasts seventeen brilliant minds in its team. Have there been any changes to the team structure since? Why is interdisciplinarity so important to your project? Are there some expertise gaps you would like to fill regarding the future ambitions of DISSINET? And, as a side**

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**note, do you think that opening DISSINET up for interested students could yield positive results?**

I have the experience of transition between DISSINET I which was funded by the EXPRO project under the Czech Science Foundation and this ERC project, DISSINET II, if you will. That was a transition from five to ten, and, subsequently, more people, and as I said already this is a non-linear difference. What I needed, and what I benefit from daily, is the help of Robert Shaw and Jolana Navrátilová in all difficult research-related and team management-related decisions of the deputy PI of the project. Robert Shaw stands at my side for all of the problems and plans concerning our directions and Jolana Navrátilová in many important decisions concerning the impact of changes and decisions on the team. We are a threefold leadership, which was needed for a group of this size. Concerning the expertise gaps, you never can completely plan the directions and positions. For instance, it turned out that the natural language processing (NLP) part of our project was not as ambitious and inspiring in the grant application as it later came to be. Today, we could easily have, not one position for NLP, but three. The search never ends. We also came up with many more ideas as the project developed than we had in the process of writing the whole thing, which was beneficial for us. Concerning the gaps we have not fully covered: there is certainly a need for a cleaner accommodation of large language models (or LLMs). In the course of the project, a massive generalisation of LLMs occurred. They were seen as having potential in the practice of analysing these human artefacts which are texts. Therefore, I think that if we devised DISSINET now we would certainly involve an A.I. engineer who would devise specific tools for our work with most of the Latin sources, which would help the flow of our research.

On a different side, public relations. It is not enough to just do great research; people must know about it. Of course, we can, from time to time, post a message on X/Twitter ourselves. But this is not about posting occasionally, this is about a coherent, pre-planned communication campaign. It is about saying that historical research matters, and that something is interesting here for history students, both history of religion and beyond. Showing them how important this data-oriented history is and how many of these things, which could be put into structured data, are not available and also data analysis is not part of curricula in history. A communication campaign for different kinds of audiences would make us matter. But this would need a specialist, somebody able to build and follow up such a communication campaign. That also ties into the question of opening up for students. Absolutely. There is the limiting factor of our research being built in such a way that most of it closely consults Latin sources, while our curriculum does not specifically train to understand this language to a sufficient degree of fluency. Despite this, we already have a first defended BA thesis which was done under DISSINET by Vítězslav Dostál and it is a great success. We are open to proposals of BA and MA theses either from within DISSINET or close to it. One example of a topic could be witchcraft trials in the Czech lands. There is an ongoing project, which is not on mediaeval or inquisition records per se, but on witchcraft trials judged mostly by secular courts. While the dataset we assembled is still waiting for many

kinds of analysis, and thus we are completely open to supervising theses concerning themes close to this one.

**InkVisitor, one of your research tools, is an open-source, browser-based research environment designed to “transform texts into complex structured data.” Could you lift the veil on the function and potential of InkVisitor for both DISSINET and other research projects that may be interested in utilizing its technology? Also, do you see any merit in using A.I. in the study of medieval heresies and the field of digital humanities in general?**

InkVisitor is still in an early phase of development for the ambition it has. You can look at it as a text annotation tool, which can be compared to tools well known for qualitative data analysis such as ATLAS.ti. What we are trying to do, is to go beyond tagging passages with keywords. We model the text in a much more syntactic way e.g. subject, verb, object and so on. We create a model of the text which will then have several uses for different kinds of research. The idea is to read the text once, do a lot of labour during your first in-depth reading and then benefit from it for several pieces of research that you did not even think about when reading it for the first time. My big dream is that we are also able to, metaphorically speaking, sell it to some social science people who have experience working with qualitative data analysis software. It can be especially relevant where discourse matters, where you are not only interested in extracting people, places and dates, but you are interested in understanding the overall framing and how this framing plays a role in your interpretation.

It is in such situations that this “Computer-Assisted Semantic Modelling”, or CASTEMO, as we have labelled the approach, pays off. Almost everybody uses AI as the central brain of humanity and programming assistants nowadays, we do as well. More directly, we are trying to find a proper place for the use of LLMs in our research pipelines. Currently, a big challenge is to extract specific relational data close to the structure of triplets, structures where there is a specific subject, verb and object, from inquisition records which are in Latin and several other languages; and understand which person is the subject and object, when they are often represented by pronouns or the subject being implicit. And LLMs are very good at that. We do not use this brute force approach of feeding the program inquisition records and finding out what it does. Instead, we are searching for precise places where an LLM is much better than, for example, some rule-based approaches. We see much potential here and I would love to transform InkVisitor into an AI-powered research assistance tool in the future.

**Lastly, since your acquisition of the EXPRO grant in 2019, and the subsequent birth of DISSINET, many years have gone by. Could you give us the latest insight into the developments at DISSINET? Which way is the project going next? Where is the team focusing its efforts?**

As I mentioned, we found out just how much potential lies in the analysis of textual corpora. We are also figuring out how to build upon our manually annotated

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data and continue towards text mining and also finding ways to connect the two. As a broader dream, I think that by 2028 we will have developed a nice analytical and training hub for CASTEMO and, therefore, my dream is to talk to some other researchers, teams, and projects about a consortium where we would be able to offer these competencies acquired throughout the years. What we will need to do is demonstrate to them the usefulness of this data-oriented approach and data analysis in historical contexts which would extend the family of users of InkVisitor and also the availability of data on pre-modern human behaviour.

**LEVYNA: Mgr. Martin Lang, Ph.D.**

**How has the change of becoming the director of LEVYNA affected your work and research life? Do you still have the same amount of time for research, or has it become more challenging?**

I have to first say that was very fortunate that Radek Kundt became the head of the Department. Together with our admins Ivona Vrzalová and Kristýna Čižmářová, they do a lot of background work and deserve praise for it. Their efforts make my work easier, so I still have time for research, but it is true that even with their help it is still challenging to find enough time for research. I had to change my way of working, such as saying no to people much more often and becoming more efficient. I also try to reserve one or two days a week for meetings and administration so that I can have longer uninterrupted time for research for the rest of the week. However, I like what I do, it is doable and even though it is challenging it is not overwhelming at the moment.

I should also point out that LEVYNA as a research centre is slightly different from other research centres in the sense that it is not a lab where it would be only me as a Principal Investigator and a team of postdocs and doctoral students working directly under me. Instead, we are a group of independent researchers, including PhD students, who work with different mentors. This makes it much easier for me to manage the demands of the lab. Although I am responsible for coordinating the work, facilitating the research, and providing feedback, it is not as demanding as managing a team of ten people working directly under me on a project.

**What is it like to lead such a relatively large group of people? Is it challenging? What does it take to keep LEVYNA running? And lastly, what do you think is required in terms of experience and knowledge as the head of LEVYNA?**

Two main challenges come to mind. First, people find it difficult to have sufficient time for research because we all hold different positions at either our department or another, be it an administrative position or a teaching position. For me, the challenge is to try to keep people's minds on research and continually do research-related work. To address this issue, LEVYNA has weekly clubs, such as writing or reading clubs. For example, in the reading club, we read interesting papers that

we might not have time to read otherwise. We set a specific time aside and discuss what we have read, try to come up with constructive critique and some extensions to our own work. This reading club gives us an opportunity to keep up with the relevant literature, improve our discussion skills and avoid getting bogged down by our daily administrative work.

The second challenge that comes with the specificity of LEVYNA is that each person in the group has a different goal and different needs in what they want to achieve in the team. I am trying to find a coherent program for the group that would benefit most of the members. For example, some PhD students want to stay in academia, while others may be interested in the subject but want to pursue a different career path after their PhD. I am trying to find a balance and develop the most helpful program for everyone.

Regarding experience and knowledge, at least in my view, I think the head of such a research centre should be well-networked with other departments across the world which is important for several reasons; for example, to find suitable collaborators for other people, or to help our graduates find postdoctoral positions by having the contacts and knowing whom to suggest. Another important aspect of my position is to follow recent trends in academia and our field, which again comes with networking and also the use of social media. Despite all the negative aspects of social media, such as X/Twitter, which currently I would not necessarily recommend using, academic Twitter used to be an important resource, especially for early career researchers who could learn from other scholars worldwide, not just the closed circle at their university. While these discussions partly shifted to different platforms such as BlueSky or Mastodon, I feel it is important to follow them because they allow us to keep our finger on the pulse, so to speak. So, one of the things I try to do in LEVYNA is to bring some of those discussions from social media into the lab so that we would know what the latest trends are in the fields relevant to our research. One specific example can be the principles of open science that we try to implement in our lab and that are currently hotly debated, as in how to utilize them.

Another important characteristic or skill is to have sufficient experience with research to be able to troubleshoot issues others may have. During our meetings, we often try to help each other with the issues we encounter, which can be with a specific research design, a specific device, or some administrative procedure. Related to research experience is also having a set of soft skills in publishing papers including, for example, where to publish, how to approach the editors, and how to write a response letter. It is something that you do not learn at school, but it is important in academia. I think it is very useful for the centre heads to have these skills to be able to pass them on to the members of these centres because it is part of the academic life that is not so obvious from the outside.

Finally, this should have probably been first, be a good manager, know how to spend the budget, understand the norms and the regulations of the workplace and so on. As a director, I also try to influence these norms and ways things are done at the university, but that is, of course, a very difficult and long-term task.

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**Your research areas include a very broad range, from ritualized behaviour in connection to anxiety, intragroup cooperation, signalling theory, and even mental models of morality. Is there a thread (be it theoretical, methodological, or thematic) that connects all these different research problems? For example, as your website states, you follow the work of Bronisław Malinowski and his statement that ritualized behaviour reduces anxiety. Could you tell us something more about this type of inspiration and if there are any other important researchers or theories that you are building on?**

I will begin with Malinowski's theory, which is a good example of how we work at LEVYNA. The theory states that when people are in uncertain and uncontrollable environments, they experience anxiety and a compulsion to reduce this anxiety. If they cannot do anything pragmatic to reduce it, they may resort to rituals. Although this theory is over a century old, we test it experimentally using novel paradigms, research designs, and technologies from other disciplines. For instance, we can measure whether ritual behaviour affects people's self-reported *and* physiological anxiety which would be very difficult if not impossible in Malinowski's times.

Another example is Émile Durkheim, a renowned sociologist who studied collective effervescence as a means of social bonding. While modern-day terminology may differ from Durkheim's, his observations of group dynamics and the role of rituals in social bonding remain insightful. Furthermore, we can use new technologies to better understand the mechanisms behind these effects. It is not enough to simply observe the increase in social bonding resulting from rituals; we must also strive to understand how this increase happens.

Generally, I believe that studying religion requires an interdisciplinary approach. By looking at religious beliefs and behaviours from multiple angles and disciplines, we can gain a more complex understanding of the phenomena. This approach also allows us to cross-corroborate hypotheses, leading to a deeper comprehension of the subject or revision of theories if the evidence from different disciplines does not fit together. If we do not see something happening at one level, we can reformulate our questions and hypotheses to gain a better understanding. This cross-corroboration between different levels of investigation is crucial in studying human culture and behaviour, which are some of the most complex phenomena on the Earth.

**Recently you advertised two postdoc positions in the project *Computing Religious Devotion: How Reinforcing Supernatural Beliefs Affects Normative Models in the Mind* (CREDO for short), could you tell us what the project is, and, in this context, how potential students (bachelor or master) could join LEVYNA? Is it enough to have a general interest in cognitive-psychological approaches or is it necessary to have a precise vision of what they want to research?**

Regarding the CREDO project, we have two postdocs and two PhD positions. The project's focus is to understand moral decision-making, particularly the role of religion in this decision-making process. While previous research has shown how

religious people behave in moral dilemmas, we want to understand the cognitive process behind the decision-making. Specifically, we want to explore whether and how religious belief affects the decision-making process. To give you an example, if a person finds a wallet on the street, what is the cascade of thoughts that follow and how does religious devotion affect this process? One hypothesis is that religious people have a more limited view of their possible actions and would not consider taking the wallet home as an immoral action. Another hypothesis might be that the normative action has such a high value that it is intuitively and quickly selected as the best option. Yet others proposed that this thought process is deliberative and that religious people need to consciously “consult” their norms to decide what to do. We want to create a mathematical model of this decision-making process and test the model across different cultures to understand how universal the decision-making process is or if it differs based on cultural factors (including the Czech Republic).

If you are interested in this project or the work of our lab, please get in touch with us. General interest is more than enough even if people are curious about what we do, they can always get in touch with me, and I can think about ways to engage them in our activities. To get involved, you can follow us on social media, attend our speaker series, or have some members of the LEVYNA team as bachelor thesis or master thesis supervisors. We are also open to soft collaboration, like helping us with research projects, coding participant answers, developing stimuli for experiments, testing surveys, or conducting literature reviews. We are currently working on making this process more official, but for now, you can e-mail us, and we can figure out the best way to collaborate.

**One of the projects that you recently finished in LEVYNA was called Scaring Ritual, Fierce Intergroup Conflict and Extreme Prosociality (SACRIFICE). Can you tell us what type of project this is? What were, in your opinion, the best results you have achieved and if you encountered any difficulties in this research?**

This project was centred around the costly signalling theory of religion, which aims to explain the puzzling fact that people participate in extreme rituals such as the Thaipooam Kavadi that we study in Mauritius. These rituals are often painful, time-consuming, and require a lot of resources, and we wonder why people would go through all that trouble. The theory suggests that, by performing these rituals, people signal a commitment to their community. This theory comes from behavioural ecology and has been used to explain exaggerated traits in non-human animals. The idea is that if animals want to advertise a certain quality they possess, they often attach a cost to this signal such that individuals who do not have this quality cannot afford to send such signals.

In the SACRIFICE research, we aimed to understand the role of costly signals in intergroup competition because previous ethnographic research has shown that extreme rituals are often associated with intergroup warfare, presumably because group members need to assure each other of their commitment to the common cause. We conducted an experiment in which participants chose whether to pay a cost from their limited resources to form groups with other such signallers. Why

most participants chose not to pay the signal costs as it disadvantaged them in the competition, those who did were found to be super cooperative and their groups won most of the competitions with other groups. Interestingly, when we assigned people to pay these signal costs, we did not observe the same effect, suggesting that simply forcing people to pay these costs does not make them cooperative.

**I would like to ask you if you have certain goals for the future that you have set for yourself as the head of LEVYNA, and at the same time, in which direction do you want the workplace to go?**

First, in terms of my goals for the future, we are aiming for the lab to be more international and diverse, and we are working to attract more people from abroad and with different skills. We would like to have more diverse skills in the lab, which is useful for the type of work we do. With such an international and interdisciplinary team, the ultimate goal is to do top-tier research and be recognized by other researchers.