

## Tilburg University

### Fons van de Vijver (1952-2019)

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## Fons van de Vijver (1952-2019): A Life of Brilliance and Kindness

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... highly competent, a great listener, punctual as a Swiss clock, and a genuine humanitarian.

—Walt Lonner (2019)  
Founding and Senior Editor  
*Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*



On June 1, 2019, Fons van de Vijver passed away at the age of 66 years, suddenly and unexpectedly. He was very fit and healthy, but a brain hemorrhage proved to be his undoing. With his large circle of PhD students and colleagues, we are mourning his death. First and foremost our thoughts are with Lona, Fons' wife, and with his family. Fons and Lona had moved to Australia after Fons' retirement less than a year before. Their dreams about a future of happy retirement in natural surroundings were shattered. It is painful to realize what might have been, but never will be.

In 2012, Fons was interviewed by Elina Halonen for the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology (IACCP) Research Heroes series. He recounted that his interest in culture may have come from his growing up in

a small village on the border between the Netherlands and Belgium, which was not a border in terms of language and culture. The strange combination of being both very similar to and very different from the people on the other side of the border was intriguing.

He went on to say, "I can still look endlessly at what people do when I travel (my wife always reminds me that I should not do it)."

Fons studied psychology at Tilburg University in the Netherlands, where he obtained his PhD (1991) and became professor of cross-cultural psychology (2001), and where he was vice-dean for education and vice-dean for research. He worked in Tilburg until his retirement, but continued to hold an extraordinary chair at North-West University, South Africa, and at the University of Queensland, Australia, and a senior research position at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, Russia.

He was a central figure in cross-cultural psychology. He was President of the IACCP. He also served as President of the European Association of Psychological Assessment and of Division 2 (Assessment and Evaluation) of the International Association of Applied Psychology (IAAP). He

was a member of the Social Science Council of the Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences. In 2013, he received the International Award of the American Psychological Association (for contributions to international cooperation and to the advancement of knowledge of psychology); he was a Fellow of the IAAP, and recipient of the 2014 Sindbad Award of the Dutch Psychological Association (for contributions to intercultural psychology).

He was an active participant in other professional organizations: the International Academy for Intercultural Research, the International Test Commission, and the World Association for Personality Psychology. He served as an Associate Editor for an impressive list of journals across a broad range of areas: *Parenting, Psychology and Developing Societies, European Journal of Psychological Assessment, Child Development, South African Journal of Industrial Psychology, and Survey Research Methods*. He was a Consulting Editor for 12 journals, and an ad hoc reviewer for over 150 journals, covering fields as far apart as agricultural research, brain sciences, criminology, linguistics, humor, sex roles, migration, education, and economics. His reach across areas of science was both broad and deep, and he used his knowledge and insight widely for rendering services to individual persons, scientific associations, and social institutions.

Already as a graduate student, Fons developed an interest in psychometrics and in cross-cultural psychology. Although his research later expanded in various directions, the combination of these two interests remained the core of his scientific career. His early work on research methods and the analysis of bias and equivalence in cross-cultural data culminated in the classic book by van de Vijver and Leung, *Methods and Data Analysis for Cross-Cultural Research* (SAGE, 1997). Other highlights of his career include his contributions to the *Guidelines for Translating and Adapting Tests* of the International Test Commission, empirical research on the domain specificity of acculturation styles, and the *South African Personality Inventory* (SAPI) project combining the “emic” and the “etic” side of personality in a multi-language society. In the last few years, he made important contributions to the methodology of the Talis project and other large-scale projects on international educational assessment of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

His expertise in methodology and psychometrics enabled Fons to recognize the scope and limitations of empirical cross-cultural studies. He recognized the weaknesses of the field, but more than many other methodologists appreciated that one must make do with what one has. He accepted the state of the field as the basis for furthering its developments, but was open to new ideas if they had been or could be incorporated in empirical research. He was averse to theoretical dogma; there never was, nor could there have been, a single “theory of van de Vijver.” He accepted existing conceptualizations as vehicles for differences in behavior that are in need of pragmatic explanation.

Fons was a most productive researcher. His, still growing, list of publications counts more than 570 items; the first entry is a paper from 1982 that was published in this Journal. He was the promoter or co-promoter of over 40 PhDs, many of them external students who specifically wanted to work with Fons. He was a great mentor not only for his students but also for his colleagues. His counsel teased out the potential of the projects he got involved in, while respecting the core of the research questions. He was incredibly efficient, which enabled him to provide feedback to many. His criticisms were constructive, they were never to derogate the work of others but to point out ways of making it better. Fons empowered early career researchers from all over the world and thereby contributed to building a stronger field. He said, “There is not a single project I was involved in that I found a waste of time” (Halonen, 2012), and his immersion into his work was obvious to his many collaborators. He was always prepared to answer a question or help solve a problem. Somehow, he had time for everything and everyone.

We would like to mention Fons’ contributions to *JCCP* over many years, as a frequent reviewer, Consulting Editor, Associate Editor, and for the period of 2001-2007 as Editor. Following previous Editors who laid a foundation for *JCCP* to grow and thrive, Fons encouraged

researchers to find “new solutions to old problems” and to “develop new approaches or models that shed a new light on reality” along with tools that could be used by many researchers (Halonen, 2012). His focus on sound methodology brought the research published in *JCCP* to a higher level. His insightful editing and pragmatic advice to authors resulted in clear, high-quality manuscripts and strengthened their ongoing research programs.

Fons was the first person colleagues on *JCCP*'s editorial board turned to when a difficult paper needed “another set of thoughtful eyes.” Although he was certainly busy with his own work, he gladly took on these requests, while knowing they would never be recognized by others and could not be listed on a resume. He wanted *JCCP* and science to be better and he was delighted to be part of that process. In this respect, he was truly amazing. He made many important contributions to *JCCP* that can never be acknowledged.

Fons was not only respected as a scientist and colleague but also very much liked as a person. His enthusiasm was irresistible, and he invited colleagues to join him for engaging conversation, for good wine, and to be part of trusting, enduring friendships. With his warm smile and deep, infectious laugh, he was sought after by longtime friends and new acquaintances at the many IACCP conferences he attended. We cannot summarize this better than Sharon Glazer, Treasurer of IACCP when Fons was President, who wrote in an e-mail:

As with you all, I share the sorrow and disbelief in losing one of the most brilliant minds in cross-cultural psychology. More than that, however, is that Fons was a true mentor, a peacemaker, a kind soul. He was a person who believed in others, trusted in others, and listened to everyone.

Like many others, we will miss Fons.

*Deborah Best and Ype Poortinga*

## Reference

Halonen, E. (2012). IACCP Research Heroes: Fons van de Vijver. Retrieved from <http://www.iaccp.org/node/468>