

PORTRAIT



CAMILLA BELLONE

NCCR-Synapsy Project Leader and Steering Committee Member

“Newly Professor, Newly Mom!”

Camilla Bellone has recently joined the NCCR-SYNAPSY’s autism project as a new group leader. In 2014 she was awarded a Professeur Boursier (Scholarship Professorship) from the Swiss National Science Foundation and celebrated this accomplishment by having her first child, a baby boy. She is tackling the challenges of being a mother on top of building her own research lab. We asked her how her career and projects are progressing.

SYNAPSY: You were very busy over the last two years. Can you give us an update?

Camilla Bellone: I was awarded a Professor Boursier scholarship from the Swiss National Science Foundation in May 2014. A week after, I found out I was pregnant. So I had to build my laboratory at the University of Lausanne at the same time as my baby was being born. Giovanni, my son, has been very understanding.

S: Having children is often seen as an obstacle to a woman’s career. You prove that women can combine family-life and science. How do you manage it?

CB: It is somehow hard to carry out, but clearly feasible, even though I have three major handicaps. Firstly, my husband travels a lot for the World Health Organization. Secondly, the grandparents live in Italy. Lastly, daycares are problematic in Switzerland: they’re usually full and not very practical. I only manage because of my husband’s solidarity. In fact, we had to arrange a tripartite with a nanny. So it’s really a question of organizational skills.

S: Concerning women’s careers in science: What were the main barriers you faced? What advice would you give to the next generation?

CB: Girls are generally afraid of scientific careers because of all these gender stereotypes, but I personally never experienced any sexist problems! Girls need to believe in themselves, they can do it, it is feasible. And for this, having a great example, a mentor, helps. This was the case for me: Monica Di Luca was “The woman to be”. Also, girls have to learn how to say no, really.

S: How did you get into neurosciences?

CB: I studied pharmacy at the University of Milano where I did a Master’s degree with Monica Di Luca. She was very inspiring. Following her courses was instrumental in my choosing neurosciences. Her lectures made me realize how brain sciences are an open field of research with millions of possibilities. I, then, started a PhD in her lab and had the opportunity to move abroad, thanks to the Italian PhD pro-gram, and joined Christian Lüscher’s group at the University of Geneva where I learned synapse physiology. Then I did my postdoctoral research with Roger Nicoll at the University of California studying NMDA receptors. I was so fortunate to have Monica, Christian and Roger, as such excellent mentors all through my career. I came back to Geneva and got an “Ambizione” grant from the Swiss National Science Foundation. I’d like to say that this grant is a unique opportunity to start asking your own unique questions and learn how to manage people before building your own lab.

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S: NCCR-SYNAPSY aims to connect neuroscience and psychiatry. Is SYNAPSY doing it well?

CB: SYNAPSY is launching an entire new world! It gives the possibility to speak to and hang out with clinicians. This is mandatory because it brings different points of view to fundamental scientists, offering other perspectives. The NCCR really serves to fill this gap. More than interacting with doctors, I would love to meet patients. I'm convinced it would help to formulate new questions. Moreover, I enjoy the SYNAPSY environment a lot, it gives an opportunity to young researchers like me to be integrated into a wider network and to learn from it.

S: Could you tell us more about your current interests?

CB: I am pursuing what I initiated with my Ambizione grant. I am looking at the postnatal development of the reward circuit. More particularly, I am questioning the critical period that is sensitive to reward. Developmental defaults of this system are implicated in several brain pathologies, including autism spectrum disorders and schizophrenia. This is a very promising field, especially because the VTA is seen more and more as being concerned with additional brain functions other than addiction.

S: Being a Professeur Boursier is only a step in an academic career. What are your own career plans?

CB: My dream would be to stay in Switzerland with a Full Professorship. Switzerland is the best place for science, with great funding opportunities, selection criteria mainly based on performance and a competitive, but relaxed, atmosphere.

By Yann Bernardinelli
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