



The ALBA Diversity Podcast

Season 1- Episode 8

Merima Sabanovic - The nomadic life of scientists

Speaker Key:

SM Shruti Muralidhar (Podcast host)

MS Merima Sabanovic (Guest)

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SM Hello, and welcome to the ALBA Diversity Podcast, an ALBA Network undertaking to profile and highlight diverse and immigrant neuroscientists. The ALBA Network aims to promote equity and diversity in the brain sciences. We talk to neuroscientists across positions, careers paths and backgrounds to better understand their personal journeys.

We showcase the grit and determination it takes to overcome hurdles as part of under-represented or minority groups. We talk about what keeps them going as individuals and as neuroscientists in today's world.

MS Yes, so my name is Merima Sabanovic, and I'm currently a PhD student at the University of Oxford. I'm studying neuroscience.

SM Before we go ahead, can you just say where you are from and the name of the place, please. The name of the small town. That would be amazing. And yes, when did you start moving around the world?

MS So, I'm originally from Bosnia and Herzegovina. I grew up there until I was about 18. And then after high school I moved to Abu Dhabi for my undergraduate studies.

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And I was living in London for a semester. And then, now I moved to Oxford for my PhD. But yes, the little town is called [Unclear].

And my current work is about psychedelic drugs and how they can affect our brains in the long term, way after the acute intoxication phase. I look at how this might affect cognitive flexibility and just brain structure in general, which would hypothetically help explain the lasting remission that is observed in clinical studies that show that a single psychedelic assisted psychotherapy is effective in treating a wide range of neuropsychiatric disorders, from depression, anxiety and PTSD.

And this is in treatment-resistant populations where traditional pharmacotherapies just did not work. So, it's quite an exciting field and it has had its renaissance in the past decade. So, I'm very excited to contribute a little bit.

SM What made you interested in this in the first place? Psychedelics and



neuroscience?

MS People usually assume I come from the drug part. But, actually, I was always interested in behavioural neuroscience. My work as an undergrad and as a Masters student was mostly about that.

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And so, as a behavioural neuroscientist, you want to find something that changes behaviour. And for any therapy to work, you want it to change behaviour and to do so quickly and effectively and to last for a long time.

And then all these interesting articles were coming up about psychedelics. And it's very catchy stories, and not just in scientific journals but just the media in general. And so, I was very interested and kind of confused. Well, what are these magical things?

SM They don't [overtalking].

MS Yes. And I will admit I had a fair share of misinformed judgments about drugs in general. And then when I started doing my deep literature review and going into all these old studies from the 60s and the 70s and then finding out all about the political background of why these drugs were illegalised, it really opened my mind. So, I think it taught me not to judge a little bit. Made me more liberal.

But it's definitely something that, I mean it's a really fascinating topic that keeps surprising all the time.

SM That's wonderful. I mean that's exactly what you need to keep that enthusiasm in neuroscience. When was the first time you thought about neurons and the brain? And I know you already told us a little bit about how you're interested in behaviour. But something must have pushed a little bit, like maybe during undergrad being like, huh, behaviour is connected to the brain. How did that switch happen?

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MS So, when I went to undergrad I thought I was going to do chemistry. But I was aware... So, I started my undergraduate at New York University in Abu Dhabi. And I knew that they had a specialisation in brain and cognitive science. But I mean you don't really study brains so much in high school because it's too advanced. Yes, you're just told, this is the brain. It does really complicated things. We can't tell you about that now. So, I was aware of the program, but then I just didn't know what that would even mean.

And then within the first few semesters at university, whenever there was a biology class, I would always have so many questions. And a student gets frustrated when they ask, well, how does this work? And then the professor is just like, well, actually, we don't know. And there's so much of that in neuroscience.

It's ironically easier to ask really specific questions about specific proteins or genes. And we can zoom in now. We have the technology. But when you ask about behaviour and especially complex behaviour or just anything that the whole brain would require to orchestrate, it's like we don't really know how to start answering those questions. And especially currently neuroscience it's very tech-



driven. If you want a fancy paper in the holy trinity of journals you need to have everything from [overtalking].

SM You need to have the cash and imaging. You need to have [overtalking].

MS You need to have, exactly. But just need to do everything.

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And it doesn't even matter if it makes sense to do that. It doesn't even matter if it actually answers your question. But as many techniques that you can pile in there. And behaviour has kind of moved to being the lower of the neurosciences. Because it's not glitzy anymore. It's not glitzy work to just sit there and wait for animals to do something and to do animal work. But it still made more sense to me to observe and study something that I can literally observe. That I can manipulate and then see an immediate effect.

And especially because I was always interested in more complex behaviours, like social behaviour or even sexual behaviour is complex depending on the species. And now, with mental health therapies, you need to think of a lot of different aspects of behaviour in order for your therapy to work. So, it just made more sense to me to not go down the microscope route.

When I was first was giving the psychedelic injections. So, the psychedelic response in a mouse is this head twitch that they do. So, they just kind of shake their heads. And in a video it just means a couple of frames where you don't see the ears of the animal because it's so quick. But yes, I remember the first time I was giving the injections. And technically, I shouldn't be in the room. I should actually leave the room. But then I just needed to see something so that I know it worked. And I saw that little twitch. And I was like, oh.

But you know those moments are rare. Because most of our day to day is just... Let's say it. It's boring sometimes.

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SM It is. Absolutely.

MS And so, when those rare moments happen where you're just so excited about something it is pure joy.

SM That's fantastic. Thank you for telling us about that. It's so cool what fascinates people. Is there somebody who you looked up to in neuroscience, in your life? Is there somebody who you think is a role model, mentor and you've learned a lot from them?

MS I've had great supervisors in my undergraduate. Dipesh Deray was one of them. And Justin [Unclear]. Amazing professors and just tutors that inspire you to do work. Not necessarily work that they're doing, but just they gave me this thinking that, oh, I can do this work. And I think, as a student, when you're going into science it's a very abstract thing of what it is to be a scientist. And what it is that you do, day to day.

And so, when I first started working in the lab I had no idea what I was supposed



to be doing. And the fact that, oh, it's just making cables and connecting things and setting up equipment that ends up taking most of our time. Maybe to someone it would mean that it's less magical as a result. But, actually, to me, it meant that, oh, I can do this. It's just work. It's normal work. And these people have learned it, so I can learn it too.

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And my postdoc that trained me up in that lab. We had very different personalities. And I may not necessarily agree with his teaching technique every time, but it really worked. So, for example, the first time I was supposed to do surgeries I was so scared. Because you know the word surgery is very.

SM It's intimidating to a lot of people.

MS Yes. But then his approach was, well, we're just going to do 20 surgeries in two days and you're going to know how to do it at the end of that. And it was true. That's the best way you learn. By doing.

And I'm not really the type of person to get very impressed by people's names or achievements. For example, when someone tells, oh, there's this famous person coming to give a seminar, I don't really get that excited. I'm like, okay, but I don't know them. So, I'm not just going to be impressed by this name or a bunch of papers that they published. Because I don't know how they work or what they did.

So, what I admired in people is very much linked to their work ethic and how much effort they put into things. And how many sacrifices they had to make for their work. And not just their work. Their life and things like that. And so, I find that more valuable than admiring someone's God-given talent. Definitely more of the effort versus talent.

SM It's not easy to separate the hype from the actual person.

MS Yes. I find other things a lot more telling. A lot more applicable to me.

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Because if you're looking for someone to admire, you want to find qualities that you want to have in yourself.

SM Yes, and you want them in your vicinity, I feel. You want to learn from them and you want to see them in action. And you want to see if your values align. And that makes perfect sense. So, is your postdoc a good mentor? Did they teach you nice things other than surgery?

MS It took me a while, but we did kind of become friends. It was probably the closest day to day kind of relationship I had. I think in his case what I admired was the fact that he was living there without his family. He's Chinese. Yes. And as many of us international students and workers know, you leave people behind. He had a daughter that he hadn't seen as a baby and things like that. So, I was very happy that he decided to move back to China where he can live with them.

These are the aspects of life. Extra battles that you have to fight that nobody recognises unless they're in the same situation as you.



SM It's not something that's easy for somebody to recognise if they haven't gone through it. I feel that's probably one of the other reasons why immigrant scientists know more or less how it is to go through all of these bad, sort of not bad, but just hard times. It's not something easy to go through. To stay away from your family. Even if you don't have, I don't know, a spouse and a child. Sometimes, it's just staying away from your parents or your immediate family. And that's just hard, right?

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Is there somebody like that in your current lab that you admire and you look up to and you really like their work ethic?

MS One of my current supervisors, David Bannerman, I really wanted to work with him because he was the kindest person. He would ask me what I think first without telling me what I should be doing first. And I think that was a big sign for me as a student, where my opinion is appreciated as well and my input is being asked for versus in some other cases people would just tell you what to do. What you should be doing. And then you have to fight for your own little input there. So, I really liked that.

And I also appreciated that a lot of his work in the past has been about questioning whether the theories that we take as a complete given, whether there's a catch there. I really like that.

SM Yes, challenging the status quo. That's an important job, yes.

MS Yes.

SM Yes. Do you consider yourself to be part of an immigrant or minority group? And have there been times where you've faced discrimination because of this?

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MS I always found the language of immigration interesting. Because what's an immigrant and what's an expat? And it seems that everyone's an immigrant unless you're a white person, in which case you're an expat. And how those different words have a very different set of assumptions linked to them.

I am an immigrant in the sense that I have migrated from my country of origin now multiple times and have worked and lived elsewhere. So, yes, in the crude sense of the word, I am. I think I'm still in a very privileged position, because people cannot assume my country of origin based on how I look. They cannot assume my religion based on how I look. They cannot assume my sexual orientation. So, any of those easy targets are not available.

And if anything, if I go into the Western world, I'm being assumed to be one of them. I can blend in. And people have confused me for an American before or something. And they always think it's a compliment.

SM How do you feel about that though?

MS I don't like it. But I understand the accent and whatever. But I take great pride in the fact that I come from a small country. A very small town in that country that no



one's ever heard of. And the fact that I'm here. And so, whenever I have to introduce myself and then say where I come from then it's like, oh, really? And then I say where studied. Oh really? So, there's just a lot of these, oh really. And don't get me wrong. I like surprising people. But it does make the imposter syndrome just skyrocket.

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Because then you think, well, obviously, if they haven't seen people like you before, then it must be some sort of mistake that I'm here. And I remember when I was applying to grad schools and thinking, oh yes, I had good results and things.

But I was at my lowest of confidence levels I've ever been when I was applying, because I had that realisation that, hey, it doesn't matter how hard I work or what my grades or results or whatever are. What matters is that passport. And I needed full funding. Because unless I have full funding I cannot go and study somewhere else.

And so, I wasn't applying based on, oh, who would I want to work with and where can I do the work I want to do? It was about who can give me money. And nobody likes talking money. It's a dirty word, but it determines.

SM Yes, I don't understand why at all. I mean you can't do science in a vacuum, right?

MS Yes. I mean it determines whether you get students of diverse origin. It determines whether you get people that look and think differently than you in academic institutions. And I am very privileged and very grateful for the funding that I have right now. But I am the first one to get it. The first Bosnian to be in this program or to get these scholarships.

And I don't think I'm a special little unicorn because of it. I would much rather be 56th or 208th of something than to be the first, because it's just lonely. And it makes you wonder, well, home come? It also makes you wonder will there be anyone else, and will this depend on how I do?

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Because if I'm the first of something that people have seen, I need to be great. Otherwise, people will not bother to invest in anyone else.

SM Yes, that's a crazy amount of pressure though. I mean wow.

MS Exactly. So, now I'm just thinking I have to speak for all of the Bosnians. And yes, it's just a lot harder to get rid of that imposter syndrome. And I've spoken to postdocs for example they are saying when you were applying for jobs you get... They quickly realise they need to beat every other candidate. And not even just be better, but you need to be so much better. Because why wouldn't they just hire someone from the UK, for example, or someone from the EU? This was pre-Brexit.

And not bother with the extra, I'm putting air quotes, extra problems of hiring someone international. Because they need visas and they need work permits. And things take longer to get them to be in that country to work. And postdocs have temporary contracts and they have to move all the time, as you probably know way better than me. And so, it's already not a position in which you're well paid, in



which you have stability. And so, it's so much harder if you're trying to make it somewhere else where you do not have that support.

SM That was beautiful. I mean you just condensed everything in a nutshell. Thank you. That really spoke to me. Because as a postdoc, as an advanced postdoc, that's exactly what I'm going through right now.

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Thank you for saying it out loud. Not a lot of people have that realisation, like I said. And I'm really glad you do. And I'm really glad you have that in mind as you move forward.

You've already spoken about diversity and immigration, but I will ask you the question anyway, because I love the conversation we're having and I want us to talk more about this. Is there a time or place in your career in neuroscience until now where being inclusive of diversity has resulted in something good? Or maybe not something good. Tell us about it. What does diversity mean to you?

MS So, at NYU Abu Dhabi, it was a new institution when I was applying. Only the first graduating class was graduating at that point. And with every new institution that has the generous funding that institution had comes this great liberty to reinvent yourself. And part of that reinvention for them was to attract students from all over the world. And the way that you attract students from all over the world is to give them full funding. And I mean full funding.

And so, I was one of the students that thought of that university as the promised land. And I definitely wanted to get in, because it offered all these things. And so, in our class of about 200 we had students from more than 70 countries.

So, that is completely crazy. You live on this desert island. I mean now it's not so desert. Things have definitely changed since I've graduated.

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But you know you all live in this little bubble. And people just speak so many different languages in the dining hall. And you have people who look very different and who speak very differently and think very differently, which is not always the easiest to deal with. And everyone comes with their own culture and set of expectations and things like that. So, having roommates is really fascinating to have. But it was just so completely normal.

That was just our life, and we got to learn so much from each other. And the fact that if you're in a class about history of Iran and there's someone from that country there who can tell you first-hand experience then that just ups your game so much more. I will forever continue to praise my university, because I think it was absolutely crazy to have that experience.

And it makes you think, oh wow, we can really do anything. Because there were students there who were from countries of affluence and who probably would have had a great education regardless, who bragged about not going to Harvard and choosing this instead, which is fine. It's okay.

But there are also students who would not be able to afford education like this at



all, myself included. And it equalises in a sense that now you have access. And now you get to choose what you do with it.

Of course, when we were all graduating the real world started creeping back in. And students would apply to jobs, but then they would be like, oh, where are you from? Oh, we cannot really pay for your visa. So, things stopped being equal at that point.

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So, it really was a little bubble. But I think I still witnessed just how much one can learn and grow do that it makes no sense that where you come from limits how much you can learn if you choose to do so. I've definitely witnessed how diversity helps and how it just enriches your life and your education and everything.

SM NYU Abu Dhabi gave you a lot more than just a full ride scholarship. I mean they gave you the chance to learn from so many people and use that learning and carry it forward with you all your life. I mean here you are, so many years later, still talking to me about your time in Abu Dhabi.

MS Things are definitely changing now and it's no longer that institution. So, if you want more students than the funding you can offer becomes more limited. And so, who's to say that in a few decades it might not turn out to be just the same old university like everywhere else. But I was very happy to be there at that magical time. University of Oxford also prides itself on being so diverse and things like that.

But then for me with that reference frame that I had, I came here and I was like, you must be joking. Because if your idea of diversity is having people from all over Europe, honey, no.

SM I love that. That was the perfect reaction.

MS I mean it's true. I mean especially now after Brexit and when so many funding bodies have just withdrew.

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I mean the program that I currently study, it no longer exists. If I was just two years late I would not be here. I would not be having this opportunity that I have. And so, we all know what happens is that if they're given an option of picking one UK student, sorry, two UK students or one international student, then of course they're going to pick the two. And I'm not saying that they don't deserve it or anything like that. But I think it just clouds the judgment in a way that different things get prioritised.

And, again, it puts so much more pressure for international students and international staff that want to come and work. Because you just have to be so much better. And you don't even know what better means.

SM You don't know what you're competing against, so you can't target and improve things.

MS Exactly.

SM Diversity has become an overwhelming.



MS Catchphrase. And I see a lot of performative diversity in institutional emails and PR marketing or whatever. We don't need universities to tell us that, oh, we love diverse students. We want diverse students. Do you know what diverse students need? They need funding. They need health insurance. They need relocation costs. They need living costs. They need support for, yes, making the transition of changing your whole life or losing your identity. Losing your language. And so, we don't need the love. We need actual practical things.

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SM We need some concrete solutions that we can manage.

MS Exactly. I don't care if you love me. I just care if I'm able to be there. Because if you offer someone a place, but then not offer them the resources they need in order to come and work for you study or study at your institution, then you're not really doing the work that you think that you're doing.

SM Thank you for listening to this episode of the ALBA Diversity Podcast. To know more about the ALBA Network and its activities to promote equity and diversity in the brain sciences, please visit ALBA dot network. You can also register as a member for free and take full advantage of the network's resources. For more details, follow the Twitter handle at [network underscore ALBA](https://twitter.com/network underscore ALBA) or [ALBA net brain](https://facebook.com/ALBA net brain) on Facebook.

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