



Interview with [Michèle Tertilt](#) (Mannheim)

COSME: *Hi Michèle, thanks for agreeing to this interview. We would like to start with a couple of questions regarding your career and your research.*

How did you decide to become an economist? (or to pursue a PhD in economics)

Michèle: During my undergraduate studies in Bielefeld I had the amazing opportunity to spend a year in the PhD Program at Purdue University. Afterwards I returned back to Germany to finish my Diploma, but the idea to pursue a PhD in economics in the U.S. was born at Purdue.

C: *What are your most and least favorite parts of your job as a research economist?*

M: My favorite part is the starting of a new exciting project. I really enjoy brainstorming about new ideas with co-authors, trying out things and seeing the very first results. My least favorite part are all the dead ends one inevitably runs into.

C: *What do you consider your best work and why?*

M: My most well-cited paper is my AER paper on consumer bankruptcy. I think people like it because it was quite innovative at the time and inspired a new literature. Plus it is less esoteric than my work on polygyny or women's rights. I personally like my *Econometrica* paper in which we develop new welfare concepts when fertility is endogenous. The paper has not generated much follow-up work yet, but in my view this is a first order issue. It is impossible, for example, to evaluate family policies without a well-defined concept. But I really like all my projects. Each is like a baby that takes a long time from first conception to publication. Each paper involved a lot of nurturing until it was finally grown up and time for me to move on to new challenges.

C: *Now we would like to know about your experience regarding gender in our profession.*

In the departments where you have worked, what was the representation of women among the faculty?

M: In my PhD cohort I was one of only two women. So from the start I got used to being one of the guys. At Stanford the gender composition of the faculty changed from year to year. While now there are quite a few women, there was one year at Stanford where I was the only female faculty present in the Department. At Mannheim, as far as I know, I was the very first senior women ever hired in the Department. But things are

changing, currently we are three senior women in Mannheim, plus another four assistant professors.

C: Do you think gender plays a role, either in terms of how well you work with different colleagues (coauthors), or in terms of the recognition of your work (or in any other dimension)?

M: I have a mix of male and female co-authors and really enjoy working with all of them. I do not think it makes a difference for the recognition of my work.

C: Did you have any female mentors or role models? How about male mentors?

M: I had (and still have) many mentors and role models, mostly male. Starting from Walter Trockel (a professor at Bielefeld, who sent me to Purdue), my PhD advisor Larry Jones to my co-author Matthias Doepke. There are a few female ones too though, like Ellen McGratten at Minnesota and Susan Athey who I overlapped with at Stanford.

C: Are you a mentor to junior women economists? Do you consider this important? What is the gender composition of the PhD students you have advised so far?

M: I mentor female economists in many different contexts. For example, I started a bi-annual female faculty lunch at Mannheim. I am quite engaged with the WinE mentoring program at the EEA. I am very happy to report that we just voted at the Restud Board Meeting to co-finance the WinE retreats in the future. I hire mostly female undergraduate RAs and encourage them to go to graduate school. In terms of own PhD students I have advised a mix of men and women so far. But I talk to all the female PhD students at Mannheim, not just my own. I have also participated in several external mentoring programs within Germany and just gave a talk about obtaining EU funding to an interdisciplinary group of female researchers – an event organized by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research.

C: What advice would you give to research economists starting their career, particularly women?

M: Work on topics you are genuinely interested in and find co-authors you like spending time with. Go to conferences and talk to people. Research can be lonely at times, so it's important to make it social, fun and actively seek advice. Do not get discouraged when your papers get rejected. It happens to everyone including the most famous people!

C: What do you think about department policies that extend the tenure clock to women or both men and women when they have children?

M: That's a tricky issue. Extending the tenure clock seems reasonable and comes at low cost to most places. However, who should it be given to? If only women get it, they can be disadvantaged in their household bargaining game as it puts the woman in an asymmetric position vis-à-vis her husband – especially when both are academics. On the other hand, giving it to both can also be unfair (especially to women and men without children) if he ends up not spending much time with the kids and still gets the extra year. All considered, I am in favor of the policy though, equally for both parents.

C: What do you think are the most interesting questions still to be answered regarding the economic behaviors of men versus women?

M: There are still many exciting open questions – too numerous to mention them all. Currently I am most interested in understanding how couples make decisions, i.e. how negotiation in the household works. I think the current models we have are inadequate. Regarding other open questions, you'll soon be able to read about them in a chapter for the new Handbook of Macroeconomics which I am writing together with Matthias Doepke.

C: What do you think could be done in order to promote gender equality in our profession?

M: I know it sounds like a cliché, but I think the most effective thing is for women to step up and show that they are capable. I think there are already more than enough quotas, policies, and official mentoring programs in place. I do not see how more of them would change anything. Women need to be present at conferences, in seminars, meeting with the speakers etc., so that when opportunities, jobs, and nominations for prizes come up, people in a position of power think of them. The other change we need is within the household. Often women still do more than 50% of the housework and childcare. But this is not a “handicap” that employers can (nor should) fix. In my view, this issue needs to be negotiated with one's husband.

C: Thanks again for your time.