

An Interview with a 2023 Travel Award Winner

Dr. Anders Lillevik Thorsen, Early Career Investigator – International Awardee

Interviewed by Dr. Lisanne Michelle Jenkins of Northwestern University



Dr. Anders Lillevik Thorsen (right) and Mentor Dr. Odile A. van den Heuvel (left)

I had the pleasure of recently interviewing Dr. Anders Lillevik Thorsen about his experience as an International Travel Awardee for the Society of Biological Psychiatry. Anders is Norwegian and lives in Bergen, Norway, which he informs me is the fifth rainiest city in the world! He currently works at the Bergen Center for Brain Plasticity, Haukeland University Hospital, the Centre for Crisis Psychology, University of Bergen, and the Department of Anatomy and Neurosciences, Amsterdam University Medical Centre. His roles include being both a clinical psychologist and postdoctoral fellow under the mentorship of clinician-scientists Odile A. van den Heuvel at Amsterdam University Medical Centers (pictured above), Olga Therese Ousdal at University of Bergen and Bjarne Hansen at University of Bergen.

From early on in his career, Anders knew he wanted to understand how treatment can help people with mental disorders, and how the brain brings about this change – as well as how we can use knowledge about the brain to understand why some people don't benefit from current treatments. His research uses MRI to understand the neurobiology of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), particularly focusing on changes in the brain after psychological therapy. In recent years, he has also branched out to study anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD), working with both newly collected research participants and through large collaborations such as ENIGMA and the Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD) study. He enjoys collaborating and travel and says that SOBPA is a highlight of his year because he can meet with old friends, new collaborators and be inspired by the exciting advances in the field of psychiatry. He was kind enough to answer some of the questions about his experience as an International Travel Award winner.

As an international SOBP member, do you regularly attend in-person meetings?

I attend SOBP as often as I can since it is by far my favorite conference. Being there in person gives a totally different feeling for me than seeing the talks remotely. It also provides excellent opportunities to meet with colleagues in both the US and other parts of the world, since researchers from so many countries are represented.

Who did you select for your SOBP Travel Award Mentor and why?

I was very lucky in being able to select Isabelle M. Rosso at McLean Hospital/Harvard Medical School. She does exciting research on both PTSD and other disorders, and I'm inspired by her studies linking psychological and neurobiological processes. She was a wonderful mentor, met me in both Boston and San Diego, and introduced me to some wonderful people. I highly recommend selecting her next year, future awardees!

Was it your first-time visiting San Diego? Who else did you travel with or know at the meeting?

SOBP has drawn me to San Diego in both 2023 and 2017, so I think SOBP should get some kind of tourism sponsorship soon! I remember my first oral presentation at SOBP 2017 very well, especially how scary, and exciting it was to present our findings as well as the surge of pride after having done so. The same feelings were there this year as I watched our student Lise Skarstein Jakobsen present her first poster.

Who was the most interesting person you met for the first time at the conference?

The wonderful Janna Marie Bas-Hoogendam at Leiden University Medical Center introduced me to both Alex Shackman at University of Maryland College Park and Daniel Pine at National Institute of Mental Health, who I have admired from afar for some time. I really enjoy the social and easygoing atmosphere at SOBP, as approaching renowned experts can be quite scary in other contexts.

Did you attend any conference-related social or networking events? If so, what were they like?

The social mixer and dinner events are always great for talking to people outside of your little niche! I really enjoyed the events for Travel Awardees, where SOBP put together a great panel of experienced researchers with whom we could talk about navigating SOBP, the job market, funding, and academia in general.

Did you do any travelling in the USA before or after the conference for work or leisure?

I love visiting the US and this time a colleague and I visited Boston before the conference, and then drove from San Diego to San Francisco through Joshua Tree and Yosemite national parks afterwards. It is amazing how much variation California can offer and how welcoming its people are.

How do you think the Travel Award has or will impact your career?

Grant evaluators have already noticed the travel award, so it is something to highlight in your CV. More than that, I think the connections it provides within SOBP can be very beneficial, as the society contains so much expertise to share with new scientists.

What would you say to other individuals thinking about applying for an international travel award to SOBP?

In the words of the great Shia LaBeouf: “Just do it, don't let your dreams be dreams”! It is scary and a bit weird to write how excellent you are and how you deserve an award over all the other great candidates, especially since this kind of “hubris” is not the norm outside of academia. Get a supportive mentor who can help you figure out your strengths and weaknesses, and how you can best contribute to the field of biological psychiatry.