

Abi's PhD diary

Hello!

Welcome to my PhD diary. It is Summer 2018 and I am 28 and about to start a PhD in Social Science. Abi is not my real name, but I am a real person, and if you're reading this I want to know. Send thoughts, questions, comments and feelings to johnwakeford@icloud.com and he'll pass them on to me. It will be good to hear from you.

Abi

Episode 1

Deciding to do a PhD

I'm about to start a full time PhD in social science with an ESRC scholarship. This covers the fees and provides a living stipend for the next 3 years. This is a really exciting and privileged position to be in, and not one I would have predicted a few years ago.

To give you a brief timeline of my experience to date, after completing my undergraduate degree I worked for 3 years in human rights in Latin America. I'm from the UK, and after working in Latin America I moved back to the UK to study a full-time Masters degree. During my Masters degree, I worked part-time in the UK Civil Service. After my Masters degree, I spent one year working full-time in the Civil Service before starting my PhD (also in the UK) this year.

But, when I was growing up I didn't dream about going into academia. My dream jobs were diplomat, fashion designer, or head of the UN.

This was still the case when I started my Master's degree two years ago. I was thinking about it as a way to critically engage with the work I'd been doing in human rights and develop my career in that sector.

I had been living and working in Latin America in a human rights organisation, so I was also excited about moving back to the UK. I saw it as an opportunity to move into a more policy-oriented role with decision-making opportunities. And, a chance to reconnect with family and friends in the UK.

This changed in one of the first seminars I took on the Masters course. The professor asked everyone in the class to introduce themselves and outline the reasons they were interested in the course. I was surprised that most people in the group said they hoped to study a PhD, and when the question reached me, I said I was also considering it. That planted a seed in my mind which grew throughout the year.

This professor (Professor P) was influential in my decision to do a PhD and is now my supervisor.

It's hard to remember why I finally decided to study a PhD though, because I accepted it as a fact of life sometime between then and now. There was a point in my Masters degree when I realised that I was feeling

more fulfilled intellectually than I had for a long time. I felt adept in the environment I was in. I felt confident that my contributions were valuable, and I was engaged with what was going on. I enjoyed participating in seminars, reading, and writing, and struggling with a thought that doesn't quite sit right until it resurfaces later in a clearer shape.

I had spent most of my professional life holding back questions, but I'd found an environment where constantly questioning was a positive. A lot of people carry big questions throughout their lives. Some of my big questions are so big they feel silly. Doing a PhD means the luxury of 3 years to take one of these questions, pick a corner of it, and try to make sense.

I decided to apply for a PhD mainly based on that feeling rather than on long-term ambitions.

Getting advice

Once I started thinking about doing a PhD, I sought advice on whether and how to apply. Professor P, the PhD coordinator, wholeheartedly encouraged me to apply, but warned 'only study a PhD if you're going to follow through all the way. Unless you want a career in academia, it's a waste of time'.

Professor C told me to study a PhD, but not to consider a career in academia under any circumstances. Another junior academic piped in: I earn less now than the students I teach.

Professor K told me to work outside academia until I knew 'I couldn't live without' a PhD before committing. And someone else told me to only start a PhD if I knew I 'could walk away at any time. Like any other job. Or it will drive you crazy.'

My friend A had recently completed his PhD and I met him for lunch. 'It sucked out my soul' he told me. I was finishing his PhD and joked to me about bluffing to a class that he'd walk out unless they stopped talking over him, then realising he'd never be invited back and continuing the class anyway. My friend T had just started a PhD in the US, and she was wholeheartedly into it. American academia is paved with gold, early publications, and travel grants, she said.

The process of getting advice was helpful, mostly because my confidence was built by the fact that no-one told me I wasn't ready or able to do it. Apart from that, I just had to follow my instinct in applying, because the rest of it was too confusing.

Choosing topic, institution, and supervisor

This part was easy for me, because the topic and institution chose me.

The only university that offered me a place was the same university where I had studied my masters. I applied for a first and second choice programme and was accepted on the first choice. I chose different supervisors on each programme, with the intention of working with both of them in either case. I chose both programmes based on the supervisor because I had taken their courses during my masters. I chose the supervisors (Professors P and A) because of their research interests but also because I got along well with them. I was accepted on my first choice programme, and therefore Professor P is my supervisor. For now, I only have one supervisor, but I hope it will be possible to work with Professor A as a secondary supervisor as well as my research progresses.

The advice I got about choosing a supervisor was 'is this a 'brain I can work with for 3 years!' and it was a no brainer for me that these would both be really exciting people to work with. I enjoyed their teaching, read and loved their work, and felt that they had both pushed me to produce good work on their courses. I'd approached both of them to talk about doing a PhD with them and they both encouraged me to apply with them. They work in different departments but are in some inter-disciplinary groups together and were also both open to working together.

I chose one department (and one supervisor) as my primary discipline over the other in the end because the department and supervisor have bigger and more established reputations. I thought this would help me get funding and also help my career later. I'm still hoping to work with Professor A as a secondary supervisor, but I have had less contact with her since I applied to work with Professor P as my primary supervisor.

Choosing programmes at other universities had been more complicated. My research interests focus more around theoretical themes that cut across disciplines than a specific case study. This meant that I could have explored these through a number of disciplines, including History, Regional Studies, Gender studies, Politics, Political Theory, Cultural Studies, Anthropology, Development Studies, International Security, and International Relations. In fact, I had applied for PhD programmes in most of these areas, at different universities. The only thing all these programmes had in common was that they were in the US and had a critical focus.

I spent time identifying programmes that interested me (more in thoughts on the application process, below). I mostly looked for programmes in the US, and also identified 2 or 3 programmes in the UK. Because of deadlines, I managed to submit 7 applications in the US and only one in the UK. In the end, I was only accepted on one programme, so the decision was easy. This was at the same university and in the same department where I had studied my Masters so I knew that it was a good fit for me.

For the proposal, I framed these theoretical interests around the area I had researched for my Master's dissertation. This was partly because there were a number of big questions I still want to explore. But it was mostly because I was already aware of the literature which made it easier to crank out a proposal in time for the deadline.

Career and long-term ambitions

In the long term, I now want to work in academia.

During the full-time Masters course, I was working 2 days a week in the Civil Service. After graduating, I went full-time in that role and was promoted. Around the same time as I was accepted on a PhD programme, I applied for a further promotion in a department that would have opened up a route to my child-hood dream of a career.

This has been a really tough decision. Even though I'm sure I want to study the PhD, it feels hard walking away from an opportunity that I know will be more difficult to access from outside the Civil Service.

I'm starting the PhD with an open mind about my long-term ambitions. Actually, I'm really looking forward to a few months of just focusing on the present, rather than trying to do two jobs at once, or do something and apply for something else. It feels scary to step off the career ladder at the moment, but I'm working on the assumption that opportunities will open up during and after the PhD.

My advice on the PhD application process

These are some lessons from my experience of the application process that I hope could be helpful for others applying for a PhD. These are my thoughts at this stage so not definitive advice in any way.

1. When to apply

Apply when you are in full-time education if you can. I waited until I had graduated from my Masters to begin my PhD application. This meant deadlines were tight, I was distracted by full-time work, I didn't have access to academic staff and resources in the same way, and I wasn't in critical thinking mode. If you are studying and you know you want to apply for a PhD I would write a research proposal that you can then edit later once you have your results.

From my experience, deadlines in the US are between November and January. In the UK deadlines for applications with funding were in January. Bear in mind that some funding applications in the UK require additional paperwork and writing. Confusingly, different courses at the same university even sometimes in the same Department, have different deadlines.

You also need to coordinate your referees to meet the deadlines. I have a friend who delayed her application for a year because she hadn't advised her referee of the deadline and she was then on holiday.

There's a lot of admin involved. So, I logged everything in a spreadsheet. University/course/deadline/payment due/submitted application/referees submitted etc. This was really helpful for me for keeping track-and I love spreadsheets.

Allow (at least!) a couple of hours for making each application just for submitting certificates and filling out forms, typing your CV into tiny text boxes and battling with password resets. Also, allow an hour for finding the 'apply here' button on each website, and once you've found it save the link (in a spreadsheet) because these are not easy to track down. I owe my boyfriend a credit in my PhD already for filling out some of these forms for me.

2. Where to apply

I was advised to apply in the US where PhDs include a two year's master's degree and more teaching and publishing opportunities than in the UK. The application process is complex as it involves taking the GRE exam. I applied for seven US universities and didn't get into any of them -although one sent a nice letter to say that I was a very strong candidate but they didn't have any funding at all for the region I was planning to research. Because of that, I strongly recommend getting in touch with departments or professors before applying in order to find out more about specific areas of research that they would be interested.

A junior academic friend in the US also advised that I get research experience (for example summer assistant to academic) to strengthen my application, which I would definitely have done if I was applying again this year. I only applied for one university in the UK, where I had done my masters. I had already worked with my proposed supervisor and I think this strengthened my application.

3. How much does it cost?

In total, I spent £1,000 on PhD applications and the GRE. For the GRE there are a bunch of practice resources available that mostly you have to pay for, as well as paying for the test. This is easy to find online. I practiced every day for 1 month and improved a lot in that time. You also have to pay £50 to £100 for each application. You need to book the GRE well in advance (at least if you are taking it in the UK). A friend had to travel five hours to the only available GRE spot before her deadlines as all spots in London were booked up. Results take 10 days to reach universities.

4. How to prepare the application

I sent my proposal and personal statement to friends, family, and two academics for edits-one of them became my supervisor. It took two months of back and forth (from November to January) to get to a point I felt happy with what I was submitting. But, because deadlines started in November, the first applications were a lot less polished. It made sense to me that the last application I submitted was also the most successful, because I hadn't ironed out my proposal until then.

The edits from my supervisor were completely invaluable. They were also very helpful in putting me in touch with academics at other universities in the UK who I might want to consider as supervisors. As well as improving my application, I was grateful to feel that I had someone on my team who wanted the best outcome for me and believed in my abilities. I don't think it is essential to have one person to do this for you -but I do recommend identifying academics that you click with and asking them for help and advice.

For the proposal, I stuck with my theoretical interests and structured versions around a continuation of the research I'd done for my Masters thesis. It feels a bit dull now to think about squeezing more water from the same stone, but there are still questions to explore there. Once you're in, you have a year to redefine your proposal.

5. Picking a supervisor

If you apply in the US, you don't need to pick a supervisor until two years in. If you apply in the UK you pick a supervisor before applying.

I got one piece of advice which was to ask, 'is this a brain that I can work with for the next three years?'. I was lucky to already know my primary supervisor not just by reading their work but also studying with them. And I talked to students whom they currently supervise who had a positive relation with him. For me, choosing a supervisor is about their academic focus but also having a compatible communication style. It matters to me that I've met my supervisor and already know that we can communicate honestly and that they will make time for supervision responsibilities.

6. Waiting for results

The last thing to note about the application process was that I was lucky to achieve full funding for my PhD from the ESRC. I heard about this in May.

From January to June I was in a limbo period receiving rejections, one acceptance, and still not knowing whether I would be able to take it on because of not having funding confirmed. I felt a bit paralysed and unable to pursue other interests during this period because I didn't know what I'd be doing in September. It meant that I stayed in a job that I was not very interested in for over

I'm going to tell you something that I wish no one had told me about. I was given a link to a website where people post the results of their PhD applications (mostly US). I rationed myself to checking it twice a day but wasted hours of anxiety checking every university and second-guessing whether I was on a reserve list based on who had heard what yet from each university and the dates that results went out last year. I logged each university in my spreadsheet-red if I'd received a rejection and orange if other people had been accepted already. This was a waste of time and increased my anxieties, but it was completely addictive. In a way, it also softened the blow of rejections, because I had usually seen that universities had already sent out acceptances already, so I knew I wasn't on the first-choice list. I can't say if I would do it again or not.

In retrospect, I learned a lot of different things this year, especially about relationships and taking care of myself. Because of this, I feel a lot readier for the challenges of a PhD. But, at times I felt frustrated about not knowing what the future held and not feeling able to make commitments that would clash with the possibility of a PhD.

Finally, some pieces of advice I received:

- Do you need a merit in your masters and Masters dissertation to apply? I've been told yes, but I know people who have one or the other and have got places with funding... so it's really best to apply and see what happens.
- Does it matter which university you do your PhD at for future career? I was told that if you are doing a PhD because you want to pursue a career in academia then you need to research at one of the more prestigious universities. I don't know if that's true. Also, if you study in the UK it's hard to work in US academia, but not the other way round.
- I was advised that if you don't get funding for a PhD it's a sign that it might not be right for you. That seems harsh to me. What I do think is that I've heard that 1 in 10 PhD students go on to achieve a career in academia. If that's the reason why you want to study a PhD, then you need to be aware that chances of success are slim. Achieving funding might indicate that you're more likely to succeed, and it might indicate to employers that you're a good candidate.

And I've also seen that on average people with a PhD earn more than those with a master or bachelors degree.

Abi PhD Diary Episode 2 - September 2018

One week before the PhD - what should I expect?

It's one week before my PhD begins and I'm feeling a mix of excited and anxious. I've got three things on my mind: preparing for the course to start, abuse of power in academia, and mental health.

Right now, I'm on the bus on my way to an interview for a part-time role at an academic journal. Reading back on my last entry I said I was excited about focusing on one thing at a time for now, but I guess I can't help myself from taking more on. (I got this job in the end. The role is mostly administrative work and will be less than 1 day a week. I'm happy because it gives a good insight into academic publishing processes. I've also realised I need to save money for the end of my PhD (more on funding in a later entry) so I need the extra income.)

Back on the bus, I'm wondering if I've done enough to prepare for the PhD before it starts. In terms of my life and well-being I feel prepared. I've been on one holiday since leaving my job and I've got another one tomorrow. My last job feels a million years ago. I've moved into a new flat with my boyfriend, and we've unpacked and organised everything. I've spent three weeks eating, sleeping, seeing friends, and not reading! It's the last chance I'll get to not read for a while I think...

But should I have read a bit more?? I've got a mounting anxiety that I'll turn up on the first day and be the only one with nothing to say. With no properly defined research topic and no memory of the knowledge that helped me get in in the first place... I'm worried about turning up at the first meeting with my supervisor and regurgitating the same ideas as during my Masters.

I feel more relaxed about it after writing my worries down. I'm sure everyone will feel like this. I've got in for a reason. And no one expects me to turn up with all the answers. Actually, I think one thing I've learned this year is to pipe down and listen to others more. All the same, I've decided to pack one academic book this weekend.

The other thing I'm wondering is, what the hell have I gotten in to?

The Avital Ronell story (click the hyperlink for the full New York Times story) has really disturbed me this week. Ronell is an NYU academic who has been accused of sexual harassment by a former PhD student who she was an adviser for. I am less shocked by the accusations, and more by a letter written and signed by academics to defend Ronell. It's signed by some of my all time heroes and it reflects so shockingly on a hierarchical structure of power in critical academia, that is ripe for abuse. I scanned the signatures afraid of spotting someone I know, but luckily only recognised people whose work I've read, and no-one I've worked with.

My experience has been that I've had help and guidance from a few academics. I suspect it's because they like me, as well as because of interest in my work. Last year I went for a 'coffee' which turned out to be a beer with a professor from my undergraduate degree who quizzed me on my love life more than my research interests. I'm sure it wouldn't have crossed any lines into harassment or abuse of power, but I felt uncomfortable. And it didn't surprise me, because academia does look like a culture of favours and nepotism. There are good reasons why professional relationships matter but there can also be negatives to this dynamic.

I'm expecting doing a PhD to be a specific working environment with its own challenges and benefits. I bumped into a friend of a friend whose boyfriend is in the final year of his PhD. 'Good luck' she said raising her eyebrow, and recommended that every PhD come with 3+ years' supply of therapy.

I spent the last year going to therapy once a week. Unlike a lot of people, I luckily wasn't suffering with debilitating depression or mental health issues. For me, it was helpful to make sense of the bread and butter of my life: relationships, self-esteem, friendships, family. After 12 months I wrapped up the sessions for the time-being. I can definitely say that I learnt so much through therapy about myself and relationships with others, and it changed my values. In the past, I valued intelligence over kindness, and that's changed now. I feel more kind to myself and others than ever, more stable and more able to listen to and respect myself and others. I wonder whether doing a PhD will challenge my new values system, and whether it will be a challenge to separate out a sense of self-worth from academic achievement.

Two weeks later: 3 weeks into the PhD- time flew!

Wow- I feel like I just came out of the other side of a tumble dryer.

Induction week felt like it happened back to front. For the first 3 days we had meetings every day. This was great for meeting and getting to know the other students in my cohort, but I felt like I got all the information I needed backwards. The other students are great- more about them later!

The first meeting was a general meeting for all new PhD students to the university, with general information about the library, funding, rules, and resources available. That was followed by a social where I met the other students on my programme.

The next day we had an introduction to our department, and information about methodology courses on offer if we needed them. The PhD convener talked us through a four-year timeline for completing a PhD - confusing for me as I had thought this was a three year programme and have funding for only three years! And I still didn't know what the next month or two was meant to look like, whether I needed to be taking methodology courses, auditing lectures, or if any of this was relevant for me.

After that we had pizza lunch with our supervisors. It was good to see my PhD supervisor! I'd emailed him already to book in an intro meeting the next week. We had a quick chat and he told me that, if I just? pick a topic and write 30 pages this year, that's a success. It was reassuring.

That afternoon we had an introduction to 'buddying' in the department from current PhD students, which turned into a general ad hoc advice session. I can hardly remember anything about it, except becoming more and more disoriented as the talk jumped from one topic ('go to summer school') to a completely different one ('remember, academics are people too, try to establish a good relationship with your supervisor by not contradicting them'). I left with my head spinning, spent an hour unsuccessfully trying to access my institutional email, the Wi-Fi and the printers - then went home with a headache.

But I still had no idea about what doing a PhD will actually look like! What was expected from me? What should I be producing? Should I be auditing lectures? Did I need to learn a methodology? Will it take three years, or four years, or longer? Is there more money for me? What is a paper? How do I speak at a conference? Who is a discussant and who is a chair? How do you convene a panel? What is everyone talking about?

First meeting with supervisor

It got a lot clearer at my first meeting with my supervisor the next week. To clarify, last time I wrote about working with two supervisors, but now it looks like I'll only be working with one for the moment. This is because my primary supervisor advised I define my research topic before I identify other academics to work with, especially because it is an administrative nightmare to work with academics across two departments. The other academic I am hoping to work with in the future is also on sabbatical at the moment, but I checked in with them and will meet when they get back.

In the meeting, my supervisor told me this is a four year, minimum, programme, although the department and funding body will try to make you finish quicker. They said that you won't get hired in academia in the end from your PhD, but on what you publish and on being known by others in your field. So, to focus on publishing an article, and building up a network by participating in conferences and making friends. They said not to take on any extra courses that will distract from my research or these aims. They advised me to forget about the topic I'd applied with for now, but to go away and read for 2 weeks, and meet again then. They said to talk to the funding office to find out about final year funding. They put me in touch with a final year PhD student and told me to copy their behaviours.

It would have been really helpful to have this information at the beginning of the week, so I guess if I was doing this again, I'd have booked in a meeting with my supervisor before all the other stuff. The impression I got was that the key decisions are made between me and my supervisor, and everything else was just guidelines.

Phew. That's it for now, but I'll update on the other students in my programme and how interesting and helpful they've been, my new job, building a new routine, and everything else, next time!

Abi PhD Diary Episode 3 - End of October 2018

Difficult adjustments and a mid-term slump

Adjusting to the (lack of) routine

I'm now almost half way through the first term into my PhD and I'm on the brink of burning out. I don't think I'm the only one. Two thirds of my cohort missed our seminar this week for a mix of illness, exhaustion, lack of interest, and brain fatigue.

I'm surprised with myself for letting myself get so exhausted though! It's crazy. No one is forcing me to go to campus, attend events, read anything, work on days I don't want to. I have almost complete control over my timetable and routine. So how can I have been so reckless to get exhausted in weeks?

It's such a classic pitfall of being your own boss. I've found that the fact that no one is telling me when to work, means that no one is telling me when not to work either. I have to give myself permission to stop working. It sounds simple, but it's daunting.

This isn't helped by the fact that the more I find out about doing a PhD, the more afraid I feel about being able to complete it all. The more I work, the more I get stressed, and the less happy I am with my decision to do a PhD in the first place. That's not what I thought it would be like. And it's irresponsible of me as well, because I'm not taking responsibility for myself, for myself as an employee of myself who has a right to a life outside of work, and responsible for myself as a person with needs. Even if my need is to take a day to sit in a cafe or watch television or to not produce. In a way I'm happy that the past couple of weeks have been tough because it's a helpful reminder for me that taking care of yourself is always the most important thing. As a final year PhD student said to me this week: it's a marathon, not a sprint.

Adjusting to being the smallest fish

This week I went to my first academic conference. It was extremely inspiring and helpful in other ways. For one thing, I now know what it looks like to present a paper. It was reassuring to see people presenting work at all levels of development, and not just the finished products that you see in journals. It was also helpful to understand the debates going on in the discipline, and a good opportunity to network.

There were a few things I found challenging about the conference. First, being the smallest fish in the pond. I was really impacted by a sense of hierarchy at the conference, junior academics mingled with other juniors, senior academics with seniors, final year PhD students with each other, first year PhDs with each other, and no one wanted to talk to the Masters students. Obviously, these divisions weren't set in stone. I was really happy when a leading academic approached me and a friend to talk about a book project after my friend asked a question at a talk. But broadly, the event played a bit on my insecurities because I didn't know who I could approach to talk to, because I didn't feel I have anything to offer at this stage in my PhD. Part of this is not having an 'elevator pitch' on my research ready, because I've binned my proposal for now and am still looking for a new topic to research.

Adjusting to making more careful arguments

There has been one other massive adjustment, one that I was aware of at the conference. This is that as a masters or undergraduate student, you're free to accept or trash arguments, and you can bring in outlandish examples and intuitive or abstract questions. But the stakes are so much higher for asking a question or critiquing an argument now. First, you're in a room of people who might one day employ you, or not... If you disrespect someone's work, or embarrass yourself by misunderstanding a point, people might remember and judge you for it. There's a politics of moderating yourself, and only saying things you can really back up. Not only at conferences. You have to be careful in general to maintain credibility in seminars and talks too. I thought that a table full of academics would be full of lively debate, but actually it can feel like a table where everyone is listening, nodding, assessing what each other are saying, and deconstructing it in their heads but not out loud. It makes sense to give a thoughtful response, and not just a polemic, but it feels cushioned and sometimes even insincere.

Adjusting my budget

I thought it would be easy to adjust my budget and spend less, but actually it's something I'm constantly noticing at the moment. My lifestyle has changed noticeably since I was in full-time employment 3 months ago. While I was working, I wouldn't think twice about getting lunch out, buying a couple of coffees a day, taking a taxi short distances at night. But now, I can throw my entire weeks budget if I don't bring a packed lunch, or I take the train instead of the bus.

In principal, I don't mind these little changes. But it's grating on me to have to be constantly monitoring my spending while I'm adjusting in other ways.

A lot of people talk about the financial stress of doing a PhD, but I'm also aware of the privilege. To put this in context, my stipend is 16,500 (tax free) a year for 3 years. (It's made a bit more complicated by the fact that I also need to save or earn around 16,500 for my fourth year). But, the starting figure of 16,500 is the same that someone earning minimum wage (£7.83) would earn in a year if they worked 40 hours every single week with no holidays, **before** they paid tax on it. With this in mind, I know that my position is very far from the struggle that a lot of people have about money all the time, and that I'm very lucky to be paid to study. At the same time, I'm finding it a challenge to adjust.

Adjusting my wardrobe

Curiously, a lot of my anxieties about adjusting play out when I'm getting dressed in the morning. A PhD is not a job, but you're not a student either. There is no dress code for the library, so in theory I am free to wear whatever I want, but I don't feel comfortable wearing bright clothes or track suits that I wear in my free time. When I left the civil service, I was so happy to put away my office-appropriate uniform of professional clothing and start wearing jeans and trainers every day, but I don't feel comfortable wearing completely casual clothes to university. I want to look like I fit in at seminars and talks - and that means looking more like a professional academic than an undergraduate student.

I don't want to fit in to the extent that I'm wearing a tweed blazer and glasses though, like some of the staff and students I've met. I also want to resist the idea that academics should look or be a certain way, by dressing in a way that feels natural to me.

There's a gender dynamic as well. Sexism in academia is an issue (see 'what is like to be a woman in philosophy' and 'combating sexism in academia'). And, like in any workplace, women are judged on what they wear. I don't want to look 'frivolous' or 'shallow' by looking like I've spent too much time getting

dressed. I don't want to be judged as disorganised if I look scruffy. I don't want to be perceived as too sexy, but I also want to feel attractive and confident in the way I'm presenting myself.

Also, clothes cost money. While I was working I could buy a winter coat, a pair of shoes, or a haircut and not throw my budget for the month. That made me feel smart and be comfortable. Now my budget has to stretch further and that's not going to be an option, even the cost of going to the dentist has to be planned in carefully.

The only hack I've settled on for feeling appropriately dressed is a lanyard. Lanyards make me look and feel professional. Lanyards are practical, but also decorative. And, someone pointed out to me that you can always tell if a conference was organised by a woman because they will give you lanyards for your name badge, so that people don't have to stare at your boobs to see your name.

Stay on the fucking bus?

Last week in October. I'm now on a 'reading week' so will have some time to rest and recuperate. Remember my job as an administrative support at an academic journal? I have not actually taken this role because I was advised to really focus on activities that will benefit my research or academic career. Instead, I am taking on an editorial support role in a different academic journal. It will be less time and money, but more relevant to my career and more interesting.

I'm also re-designing my research. This is quite a scary and vulnerable process for me at the moment. On the one hand, I feel at sea in an unlimited number of possible research questions. On the other hand, I relish the opportunity to be creative and come up with something that really interests me. I think I wrote before that I was already tired of the idea I applied with.

Picking a good research topic seems more important than ever, as I've learned that a lot of academics ultimately turn their PhD thesis into a book. This can take five years after your PhD to publish, so you might be working on the topic you choose for around 10 years in total! There are also practical considerations for planning the research, like time and money available for field work. I have less money available for supporting my studies than I thought, but, oddly, more money available for field work and studying abroad. This means it's in my interests to design my research proposal to include overseas research.

Lastly, I keep thinking I've come up with a novel idea, and then a quick search online shows that many other people have thought of it already! I find the Helsinki Bus Station Theory really helpful for making peace with this:

There are two dozen platforms, Minkkinen explains, from each of which several different bus lines depart. Thereafter, for a kilometre or more, all the lines leaving from any one platform take the same route out of the city, making identical stops.

"Each bus stop represents one year in the life of a photographer," Minkkinen says. You pick a career direction – maybe you focus on making platinum prints of nudes – and set off. Three stops later, you've got a nascent body of work. "You take those three years of work on the nude to [a gallery], and the curator asks if you are familiar with the nudes of Irving Penn." Penn's bus, it turns out, was on the same route. Annoyed to have been following someone else's path, "you hop off the bus, grab a cab... and head straight back to the bus station, looking for another platform". Three years later, something similar happens. "This goes on all your creative life: always showing new work, always being compared to others." What's the answer? "It's simple. Stay on the bus. Stay on the fucking bus."

December

Episode 4: Settling in

It's the first week of December, that's 2 weeks until the end of the first term. I've started to feel like a ship in motion, and I'm happy with my choice to do a PhD. I feel content, happy, lucky (that I can sit right now in a coffee shop on a rainy Monday afternoon), but also always almost too busy. I'm reflecting on a few things today: working with my supervisor; finding a research topic; making friends; and dancing.

Research topic and working with my supervisor

The biggest difference between now and the last entry, is that I've found an area to research. It's something that I'm interested in, and that I'm excited about finding out more about. I think it's important to the world, but will also be fun for me to focus on for the next few years. I'm relieved that I found a topic!

Last entry I wrote about 'staying on the bus' and sticking with a topic, so it could seem like a sudden turn around to change topic at this point. But, the change is not as dramatic as it sounds. I'm sticking with the same big theoretical questions I had before, but I've found a different set of case studies to analyse. On the surface it looks dramatic, but I'm still working in the same field and will be working with a similar set of theorists, for now. I know that some people on my course had very well-designed research proposals before we started, but my proposal was always a re-hash of my masters dissertation, which was only meant to get me in the door.

Finding the topic has been a really nice back and forth between me and my supervisor (Professor P). If you remember, I met with my supervisor in the first week of term, and we talked about the generalities of doing a PhD. In that meeting we also agreed the basis of how we will work together. Professor P said that it's up to me to organise meetings as and when I need them. Normally, supervisors and supervisees meet more at the beginning of the process, and less in later years once you're stuck into writing. He also said he's happy to meet at late notice if I've been inspired, or leave it longer intervals, but that I should not go off the radar completely.

In terms of preparing for meetings, P said he recommends me to always write something down before meeting, as a way to discipline my writing. But, not to send him too much stuff to read. We agreed to see how it goes, and I'm happy with that because I think we can both be honest with each-other about how much writing and meeting is too much or not enough for us. I like having flexibility and control over when and how often we meet. But, it would be easier in some ways to have a rigid structure to stick to as I don't want to be over (or under) demanding of P's time.

We met for a second time a couple of weeks later to talk about my topic, and I sent him a few pages of ideas that I'm interested in. I was embarrassed to send such a scrappy document to someone whose work I really admire, but P was very helpful at picking out key ideas and digesting them with me.

I'd met with another supervisee of his around that time, who'd told me that P is very good at focusing on the positives in early drafts and ignoring the negatives. It's a kind way of working because it trusts that you will iron out the problems yourself once the core elements are settled.

In the meeting, Professor P picked up on one thing that I'd put in as a small example of my interests and suggested that I explore that idea further. Even though it was an idea I've been thinking about for years, I hadn't thought about basing a research project around it. As soon as I started reading and research the idea, I found that I had plenty to say about it, and also many questions about it that I'm genuinely curious about.

I also talked with a lot of people (inside and outside academia) who generally reacted positively to the idea. Someone told me: there's enough people working in that area to have a community, but not there's also a lot of space to move into. It made me think about my football team. The best players aren't always the most skilful, they just make use of the available space on the pitch.

A few weeks after that meeting, I booked in another meeting with P. I didn't have anything particular to discuss when I booked the meeting in, but as soon as I'd booked it my ideas took shape really quickly on paper because I was preparing to present them to someone else. Before the next meeting I sent P a research proposal, which he was broadly happy with. This felt like a major success for me! Now I have an idea to go away and research....

Of course, when I told my PhD cohort about my new topic they all laughed at me because on the surface it has changed 100% from the last thing they heard about. (Even though the underlying theoretical questions are more or less the same). I laughed too, hopefully I won't tear it all up every two months, but if I do have to bin this idea in the future I can live with that too.

Submitting an abstract and editing with friends

Now I have an idea, I can submit proposals for papers to conferences, and start presenting my work. I'm really excited about this because I've seen how useful the feedback is that people get from presenting their work to others. I submitted my first abstract this weekend. The proposal is for a conference for post-graduate students and early career academics in the Spring, so if I'm accepted I'll need to produce the paper. I felt comfortable applying for this conference because it seems like a safe environment in which to begin presenting work.

The biggest challenge about writing the abstract was being realistic about what I'll actually be able to produce by the Spring. In my first draft of the abstract, I only focused on theory. But, feedback suggested I include some empirical research. I haven't done any empirical research yet, so I tried to make a realistic proposal about what I can actually do in the next few months.

From talking to more experienced PhDs, it seems like no-one writes any papers until their abstract is accepted.

I swapped abstracts with three friends to edit each-other's work before we submitted them. The main thing I learned in my master's degree was how helpful it is reading and editing your friends work, and vice versa. This is the first time I've shared work with students on my PhD programme and it was good to get a feel of what they're like as editors. I know some people don't like to be critical of others work, but I really appreciate friendly editors who don't hold back. I think that if you can point out a weak spot for a friend, you are doing them a massive favour.

There are two things I look out for in a friendly editor: one, engages critically with the content, and two, doesn't steal my ideas in their work. The second point sounds paranoid, but I think it's pretty normal for people to be influenced by the work they're reading, especially when they're finding their own academic voice. I know I can be. That's why I like exchanging work with people because I can get an idea of whether they're borrowing my ideas. Two of my three friends had really helpful comments on my work, and I'm super happy to have found some people to share work with.

Making friends: academic politics

I've been a bit spooked by academic competitiveness, and a little bit bogged down in academic politics this term, which I'm happy to say I feel much less invested in now. This is partly to do with my personality, I'm a very social person so I love making friends, and I also like to be liked by everyone, which everyone knows is impossible.

I've been surprised about how competitive and network-based academia is. One of the first pieces of professional advice I got was to make friends with people working in a similar area to me. I feel uncomfortable with mixing professional and personal relationships. I know that in most sectors there's an element of networking and friend making. For example, in my human rights job, half the people in the office knew each-other through friends or previous jobs. Even in the civil service I know people who had football teams etc. where they got information about opportunities opening up. As much as possible, though, I've tried to keep my friends and my job separate, but this feels harder in academia.

I'm getting the impression of academia as extremely factional. Academics are grouped by their work and theoretical approaches, and they try to fill jobs and journals with like-minded people. So it feels like you need to find a team, a community, who will have your back and support you. Part of this work is done by your academic work itself, and another part of it is the network of friends you make.

The pressure to make friends is exacerbated because academia is extremely competitive. I went to a job presentation a couple of weeks ago where 200 people had applied for a role, and all the people on the shortlist had published books. Even at PhD level it's a competitive environment. For example, my department offered funding for summer schools, which puts you in competition with your cohort. I'm finding this a challenging environment to build supportive and caring relationships in.

I've been worrying about this because I'm not sure who my friends are yet and I'm worried I've gotten off to a rocky start with some people. When I left the administrative job I'd taken on, it was a bit fractious with the team who had employed me. Also, to get the editorial support job I have now, I competed against a few others on my programme. Since then I've had the impression that people are talking about me behind my back (positive and negative things). I found this surprisingly unsettling.

I think I'll have to develop a tolerance for academic gossip because it seems par for the course. For example, a junior academic friend of mine told me about a senior academic who's book deal had been cancelled, and when I asked how they knew about it they said 'we talk'. It's ironic that in a social sciences department we spend more time talking about internal departmental politics than what's going on in the outside world. I've felt unsettled by this but I also think it's like anywhere else I've ever worked- there's a level of work-place gossip. It's up to me how much I engage in it and pass it on, but it's not up to me how much I'm the subject of it.

For now, I'm just trying to focus on doing a good job in my job, and a good job in my research. I'm sure that as I get to know people better it will be obvious who I want to be around and who I can have supportive and trusting relationships with.

Life in general- dancing and relationships

Aside from that challenge, I'm feeling very happy doing my PhD, and I'm enjoying my life in general. I've been going to a dance class every couple of weeks. This week in the warm up, everyone had to take it in turns to dance in the middle of the circle. I really enjoyed it because it was so much more terrifying than asking a question at a talk! Imagine! Also this week I scored two goals at football. I've been in a 5-a-side team for nearly 2 years and I've scored less than a handful of goals, so 2 goals in a week was a big deal for me.

Football and dancing help me remember how slow and frightening it can be to learn something new, and how exposed you can feel when you miss a goal or forget the steps. They both help me remember to be patient with myself and keep trying. It gives me confidence to not be afraid to make mistakes at university, and to feel less self-conscious.

It's also good for me to remember that academic smarts are only one type of smarts. There are people at the dance class who can remember 100 moves in a row and also make it look fun and easy, that must take another level of physical intelligence. Also, the people in my football team don't care what I'm working on- they're just happy if I turn up every week and am a good team player.

The biggest thing going on in my life at the moment is that my partner (we'll call him Bruno) has been invited abroad to do a trial for a new job. Before I decided to do a PhD we were looking into moving abroad together, but now because of the PhD I am probably fixed in the UK for the next 3 to 4 years, maybe longer depending on jobs. This is tough for us as a couple. It's important to Bruno to live in another country for a while, but I need to be in the UK, and we both want to stay together. Early next year we are going to visit the country together to get a feel for what it would be like. Because of my research topic, I can probably try to spend some time there doing research, but we'll have to work it out if he gets the job.