

## 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](mailto: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. Orit 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.

## **Episode 5 Christmas reflections**

It's Christmas eve and I'm back at my mum's house since yesterday, taking a few days 'off' (hard to know what's on and off with the PhD). I've brought a couple of books with me but not too much. Having a bit of work to do is actually quite a good excuse to get out of brining the turkey or hoovering the stairs.

It's been such a great week since term ended, I've spent every day curled up in my own home, reading whatever I feel like. Reading books instead of articles, and not sending emails. As is conventional at this time of year I'm reflecting on the past 12 months. And working through a box of chocolate ginger...

12 months ago, I had no idea what I'd be doing now. I was frantically trying to submit as many PhD applications as I could before the December and January deadlines, and in my heart I thought I'd be moving to the US for the PhD. I was researching visa applications for Bruno, and planning that we'd be moving together. We were also getting ready to move in together for the first time, which we then did in the January.

Apart from for me, I think it's also been a lot of change for Bruno this year with me doing the PhD. I know that as well as being supportive of me, he's found it tough at times to see me start something new and exciting, when he is doing the same job he's been doing for the past two years. He too is ready for a change especially because he really wanted to move somewhere new together. Now that this is not possible it's going to be really hard for both of us, especially if he decides to move somewhere new. But more on that in February once we've made the decision.

A lot has changed between last Christmas, and now I can definitely say that I feel happier than I did this time last year. I feel fulfilled in what I'm doing, and happy where I'm living and in my relationships.

### **Working on a doctorate: the luxury**

The PhD so far has been a mix of luxury and terror. The luxury is how much time I've got. Looking at the calendar for the rest of the year, there are only 5 months of the year with face to face commitments. Even when I start teaching (probably in September), there will be more months of the year when I'm free to manage my time how I like than months when I'll have to be somewhere at a given time. For me, managing my own time is one of the best things ever.

Another massive luxury is not being in an office. I started my professional career as an English language teacher- which was very tightly controlled in the sense you couldn't be late or miss a class at all. But you were standing up and moving around all day.

When I started working in human rights, it was a shock to spend so much time in an office. And that was a very casual office! You could arrive and leave when you wanted (anytime between 7 and 11 am and 3 and 8 pm were seen as normal). We all took 2 hours for lunch on a Friday together and sometimes had a beer. You never saw anyone eating at their desk, even if you brought pack lunch people ate in the kitchen and had a chat. Also, in that job, I was away about a third of the time giving training courses etc.

So, when I moved to the civil service in the UK, I couldn't believe what it was like working in a conventional office. And that's despite the fact the civil service is a very fair and flexible employer, especially the bit I was in. For example, anyone could work from home one day a week. If you worked overtime, you could take a half day another time, and so on. It was a lot better than a lot of friends I see in the private sector.

But, even with that flexibility, I got so bored some days just sitting in the same chair, looking at the same stuff. Even when I worked from home, I went stir-crazy by midday and felt brain-dead by five. There were things I really loved about the civil service and the team I worked with, and the job I was doing, but now I think it just wasn't the job for me. I wouldn't have got so bored with the office lifestyle if I was really passionate about what I was doing. But the office life-style didn't help.

When I started the PhD I was worried I'd get bored working at home, but that hasn't been the case so far. At the beginning, I would go into campus just to feel that I was achieving something each day. But now I'm much more relaxed about working at home when I don't have any seminars or meetings. I find that I don't get bored at all when I'm enjoying whatever I'm reading or (less often!) writing. I live in the type of neighbourhood which has enough cafes for self-employed people that I can go to a different one every day of the week if I want a change of scene. I only have to be careful not to spend my rent on cake. Sometimes I go out for a stroll in the park and about midday there are always old people, kids, dogs, people who want to have a chat about the weather.

Politically, I've always been against a 40-hour work week. This isn't an academic thesis, but it seems that as a society we work more and more and have less time for basic life (cooking, talking with each-other) and spend more money on entertainment when we're not working. Sometimes I work until I'm exhausted (normally it just happens, doesn't it, you don't notice that the commute and stress, and mental energy, and rain are accumulating on you and then you realise all your clothes are dirty and you haven't got anything nice to say to anyone and you have a cold). But I'm really trying to actually work the type of hours that I think are fair and reasonable, and feasible for me.

Whenever I've had an employer, I always expect them to treat me as a human being. Sometimes your mind is on other things and you can't work so hard, for example. Now, I'm kind of self-employed and kind-of employed by the university (or the ESRC). Universities are notoriously bad employers (cutting academic pensions, less paid research roles, more hourly teaching roles, poor admin, little staff support, significant gender pay gap, etc.) and that's before you look at cleaning staff on less than living wage, and outsourced canteens and so on. But I have a responsibility to myself to be a good self-employer.

All anyone tells me about is the relentless competition of academic life and the pressure to produce, but there are massive luxuries involved. Last week I was reading a book by my supervisor. It's the type of book that manages to be academic but also makes you want to turn the pages. I read it on the sofa in my house and thought I'm so lucky that I can sit and read about something that I'm interested in, then go and talk with the person who wrote it, and then write something else, something I'm even more interested in. It's pretty good.



## Working on a doctorate: the terror

Which isn't to say it's not still **terrifying**. All the time I'm sitting on the sofa, in the back of my mind I'm wondering: is this part of a 'creative process', or am I just sitting on my ass? Have I come up with a good idea? Can I deliver and actually present a piece of work that meets the standards of work I've just had the luxury of critiquing, up till now.... This week, for the first time in ages, I was kept awake at night feeling an imposter.

A colleague in my cohort shared this really great article on imposter syndrome early in the phd, and I can rationalise that I'm here for a reason. But for whatever reasons, I started remembering that I applied for 8 PhDs (7 in America), and only got into one. And that I only got funding from the waiting list. 99% of the time, I feel like I have something concrete to offer, as much as anyone else I've met who's doing the PhD. But occasionally I think, if I was really the right person for this, wouldn't I have been first choice?

What the heck. I think that my PhD programme admitted me based on a mix of my past achievements and faith in my potential based on knowing me and my work, rather than my proposal itself. I like to think that if I applied again now, with my new and improved proposal, I would have more success. But really, all you need is *one* successful application, anything else is just for your ego. I'm here, and that's all that matters.

In the past couple of weeks I've had my first **challenging feedback**. In the last week before end of term, I met my 'academic advisor' for the first time. I thought they'd have more of a mentor role than a supervisor, so I went to the meeting prepared to talk about the process of doing a PhD and not my research.

But, it turns out that here they have a key role in deciding if my research is on track at the end of the year (and because it's essentially a 5 month academic year, that means in April), and deciding whether I get upgraded a year after that, I think.

They asked me a lot of helpful and insightful questions about the research, but I hadn't thought about any of those things yet. I wasn't ready to answer questions about the proposal, like what specific sites I'd be looking at, and why I'd chosen those over other ones, and the toughest question of all, how can I demonstrate the effects of the relations I'm researching? This academic is someone who is working in a neighbouring area of research, so their feedback is definitely relevant. But it might also be different to feedback from someone working with a more similar theoretical approach.

I left the meeting feeling afraid I'd need to scrap everything and wondering if my project held any water at all. A week later, after drawing maps on paper to get more of a feel for my project and show myself that it added up to something tangible, I tentatively showed a map to my boyfriend. However, when he offered the tiniest bit of feedback, I completely lost my temper, which was embarrassing because I hadn't realised how insecure and sensitive I feel about my nascent project. I definitely need to get better at receiving feedback.



## **It's Christmas**

After that the holiday was perfectly timed for me. I just decided to put the research proposal aside, and start reading whatever I felt like. Because my research is inter-disciplinary, this is a mix of academic work, fiction, autobiography, film, art, and anything related to my topic whether pop culture or 'high' culture. A couple of times over the holiday, as I've sponged up all the knowledge I can, I've had the feeling of little light-bulb moments as pieces of ideas fall together into neat packages.

The hard work is going to be in January taking all these shards of inspiration and trying to make them coherent on paper. But right now I don't mind.

## **Episode 6 February 2019**

It's half an academic term later and I'm drinking a coffee before going back to campus after reading week. It feels like I only write at the beginning and end of term, because that's the only time I'm finding to reflect in. The rhythm of the PhD is erratic, going in stops and starts, rushes of deadlines and meetings, then reading week, summer holiday, months with no schedule. My body has taken on this rhythm by getting sick at timetabled moments.

## **My body (millennial burnout?)**

Predictably, I came down with a cold on the first day of reading week, and my body has refused to pay attention to anything since then. After three days of resting, I sat down to read books and write emails again, and after an hour I got a migraine that made it impossible for me to see the screen at all. 'Okay' I thought, my body says 'no'. I'm always grateful for my body for doing so much for me (it carries me everywhere), but also for insisting so firmly when enough is enough. I just wonder, is there more I should be doing for my body? Am I asking too much of it?

I've been off football and dancing for the past couple of months because of an injury, but I went back to play for the first time this week. Before the match I thought I'd be too exhausted to play, but it was the most fun I'd had in forever. I felt more energised after playing. The really obvious things like exercising make the biggest difference to my mood.

This article on 'Millennial burnout' struck a chord with me because it captured a lot of the ways that I'm expending low-level energy constantly without acknowledging it. The idea is that 'millennials' have internalized the idea that we should be working all the time - for example, even our social media is a form of self-branding, and even meditation is an attempt to maximise our efficiency. And we're never unreachable by phone or email. I'm not unusual in doing three things at once. As well as the PhD, I work two part-time jobs, one as an editorial assistant on an academic journal, and a new one as a private tutor to a school student. The article also talked about how many people in my generation have more debts than previous generations, less access to owning

property, and less security about when or how to have children. These are definitely things I worry about. Reading the article was reassuring because it made me recognise some of the systematic issues that are causing me to be exhausted. It also pushed me to think about how I can make the mental space I need to relax in.

I love researching my PhD, but small things are adding up to stressful anxiety in the back of my mind most of the time. I feel like I'm constantly doing calculations about when and where I'm meant to be, and how much time and money is going in and out. In addition, it's hard keeping track of all my commitments to my department, and to my funding body (the ESRC), as they all require sporadic paper work, administrative meetings and workshops.

In my experience, the three things that have made a significant positive impact on my mental health have been therapy, job security, and being around people who value and respect me. As well as that, paying attention to how my body feels is a good way of keeping track of mental health.

I know that academia will be a challenging environment for me because it doesn't always give you job security, or necessarily a supportive environment. I need to take extra care of myself, and it means paying more attention to my body and giving it what it needs. For me, it doesn't mean following rules about how much to sleep or eat or exercise. It just means not waiting until I get sick to give my body a rest. It means, if I'm not sleeping well, then to take a day off to clean, tidy, and sort admin so that I can sleep better. Trying to get a holiday feeling by taking a day trip, and having a lie in.

In more practical ways, to reduce my workload I've decided to quit my language class, and to go to less seminars that are not really useful to me.

### **Moving abroad - Bruno in Brazil**

Bruno has taken the job and is planning to move abroad in a couple of months for the next year or longer. It was a tough decision for both of us, but also quite exciting. He's not actually moving to Brazil, but for the sake of anonymity in the blog we'll say he's moving to 'Brazil'. Me and Bruno both went to Brazil for a week last month to check out the city and the job. It was a really exciting trip and I explored ways that I can tie my research to that context.

The good thing about the stop-start rhythm of the PhD and the academic year is that there are only around five months on the year I have to be based in the UK. In reality, it's more complicated than that because I need to access libraries and conferences. But, I'm planning to spend two to three months in Brazil this summer and see how it goes. If it works well, I could end up splitting my time between Brazil and the UK for the next year. Especially if Brazil works as a site to explore for my research project, and if I can make links with academics and universities there. It might actually be good for my research.

Another good thing is that I should be able to spend more time in a sunny country visiting him. And, in some ways, the decision-making process has reaffirmed our relationship and commitment to each-other. The most challenging thing about it at the moment is the practicalities of moving out of our apartment. It's a shame,

because it is such a nice apartment, but it only has one bedroom. By a stroke of luck an old friend of mine is moving to my city at the same time that Bruno leaves, so we're going to look for a two bed apartment together.

### **An encounter with the disciplinary police**

I'm happy to have had reading week of to relax, because I had a really tough week at university the week before reading week which made me doubt the supportiveness of the environment and my PhD colleagues. I presented an intro to my research at a seminar for first year PhD students in my department last week and got a mix of constructive and unconstructive feedback from my peers. Some of the feedback from my peers was unhelpfully negative. These are strong words, but I left feeling undermined and attacked, and I went home and cried.

I was quite nervous before presenting because it is the first time I have presented my work, but, I thought everyone would be broadly supportive and I would receive constructive criticism. In general, feedback from my colleagues was really useful, even though it is always tough getting critical feedback. But, a couple of people really went in hard on my work, completely dismissing the central argument, saying I hadn't demonstrated any validity to my thesis. They also said my research was outside of the disciplinary boundaries and not proper work for someone in my field. They also rejected the theoretical framing of my work saying that I had completely ignored 'facts'. To put their feedback into context, they both do relatively mainstream research, but my project is inter-disciplinary and aims to be boundary-pushing.

I suspect that every discipline, even maths, has a team of disciplinary police who tell the people working at the boundaries that what they're doing isn't really maths because there aren't enough calculations, or it's not English literature because they're reading Harry Potter. I don't know. But I felt really crushed getting this feedback because I had thought that even though my work was nowhere near polished, there was enough to it to convince someone (even someone with a different theoretical approach than me) that there was something to it that merited further investigation.

I was embarrassed that I didn't have answers to hand to defend my approach, and I felt that my peers would all think less of me because of it. Luckily, the feeling didn't last forever. I read a few helpful articles on processing feedback (this one is nice) and one of my favourite academics tweeted that the key to academia is to take your work seriously, but not yourself. All helpful advice. I was also thinking about how giving

feedback is also a really important skill for academics, and one that most people are not equipped to do in a supportive way. This experience made me think about ways that I can give appropriate feedback that is supportive but also pushes people.

One person who is very supportive of me is my supervisor and I really respect him more and more as this process progresses. After getting difficult feedback from my cohort I met with my supervisor who pretty much told me 'fuck them' and at the same time helped me grapple with the bits of my research puzzle that are troubling me and guide me in a constructive direction. I almost cried in the meeting, which was very uncomfortable for me, but he said that was fine. I appreciated that he was supportive as a person and a mentor type figure as well as pushing me academically.

A few friends from the cohort contacted me after the seminar to say sorry that I had gotten such tough feedback, and that I responded very well. That was reassuring. I'm presenting at a different seminar in a couple of weeks so I hope that it will be a more positive experience, and also one that gets easier with practice.

## **Episode 7 April 2019 Spring to Summer**

Part one:

Since my last episode everything has got a lot better. I presented again at a different workshop and it was a very positive experience. Getting helpful feedback and constructive comments from my peers and a more experienced academic was very useful for my project. Above all, it pushed me to think more about what is feasible for me to research and write up in a three to four-year period. This has helped me cutting down the breadth of my research project and focusing on making an incisive contribution to a particular area of study.

Not only was the feedback helpful for me, but the workshop itself was very inspiring. There was a good feeling between all of the participants and a sense of camaraderie not competition. There were students in the first year of the PhD, and also some in the final year. It was really interesting to see the huge difference in work. First, because the work gets to be so much better quality by the final year. But also, because by that point you're in a lot of ways stuck with what you came with. There isn't the option to change your entire approach. I'm happy to make slower progress at the beginning of my PhD if it means that I have foundations I can really stand by in a few years' time. I enjoyed seeing what everyone else was working on and working in a supportive environment.

It's Spring now, the campus is almost empty as the undergrads are preparing for their exams. In a few weeks the term ends until next September, and everyone will disperse over the summer on field work, or holidays. I have one more presentation to give, and one chapter of my research to submit to the department and then defend in a mini- upgrade. In my department the formal upgrade takes place at the end of the second year. We have an informal 'panel' or 'mini-upgrade' at the end of the first year to confirm that you will be enrolled the next year.

That means that the chapter is quite serious because they decide whether or not you can continue with the PhD based on what you submit. On one hand it's just a formality, but on the other hand it can cause problems if you don't submit something that makes sense. I feel quite optimistic about the chapter.

Part two:

I've submitted the chapter, and attended the conference. Next steps are a 'mini- upgrade' panel to defend my chapter in the Department, and planning the summer.

Here are some reflections that I've been thinking about almost at the end of the first academic year.

### 1. Do less

At the start of the year I took an optional language course, read every paper in detail, went to every public lecture in my department. By the end of this term that has all dropped off. I've started to say 'no' to more workshop invitations. When I do go, I read the paper in 20 to 40 minutes, and not two hours. Sometimes I don't read the paper at all, but I still go along to the seminar to listen. I don't feel under pressure to ask a question or make a comment at every seminar I go to. That said, lectures and seminars are still the most inspiring part of the PhD for me in a lot of ways. The chance to think with other people's work and have conversations, so I enjoy making the time to go to as much as possible.

One thing I'm still trying to work out is whether to go to the 'drinks' or not. I'd say every week there are about two talks or seminars that end in free drinks. It's not 100% social time, like relaxing with friends, but it is often fun and you get to know your colleagues better in an informal environment. There is a lot of pressure on PhD students on 'building a network', and in a competitive job market, the party or drinks at the end of a conference can feel like the most important time to actually make contacts with people who will remember you for an opportunity later. That pressure in itself can make them less fun. I've seen a lot of papers, panels, and other academic 'group projects' that have started from a conversation over drinks, which can be a good thing! But, for me, it's a shame that so much informal networking is around 'drinks' that are outside of working hours, especially for people who have to organize childcare or who don't drink. I'm not in either of those groups, but I do value my free-time in the evenings, but I do end up feeling slightly guilty when I miss the drinks.

### 2. Deadlines are flexible

This is a dangerous realisation for me because I tend to work up until the deadline. Working over the deadline by accident only makes life harder for me by allowing perfectionism to take over when I could have just submitted a less good piece of work earlier. That said, I've learned that almost all deadlines have about a week of flexibility built in. Sometimes that can work in your favour, and I'm for pushing deadlines back when it makes my life easier.

### 3. It's never over

After every deadline or presentation I've done this year I've felt a sense of relief, and a moment of satisfaction or exhaustion at having completed a task. But, within days or even minutes I get the realisation that it isn't over at all, it's just time for the next block of writing and revising based on feedback. And the next 3 years of the PhD will basically be like that. Even after the PhD, if I pursue a career in academia, it's another 5 years of adding to and improving the same project to get a publishable books. I'm starting to understand what my friend meant when she said 'it's a marathon, not a sprint'. You have to pace yourself for the long game. I've started to build in breaks for myself after key events to give a sense of completion and time to rest before picking up where I left off.



I guess the question I'm asking myself is do I care enough about my question to keep asking myself the same thing, and continue giving incomplete answers, indefinitely... To be honest, I am slightly losing sight of my motivation. And also, I realise more and more how much work there already is out there and how it will take me years and years to get a handle on it. The task looks bigger and bigger.

Part three: planning ahead.

Next year is going to be very busy. I've applied for teaching, an editing role, and I'll also be involved in organising a seminar series. Given all this, I don't think I'll have much time for my own research during term time. I'm also going to Brazil for around 3 months over the summer as my partner Bruno will have just moved there. I'm planning to write a chapter when I'm there to get ahead for next year, and start preparing my field work for next summer (possibly building up connections in Brazil to do it there). The tricky thing will be working out what books to pack.

I've been thinking a lot this year about how I'm structuring my time and how to ensure I don't get exhausted by the workload. I considered planning around a four-day working week, but I found that it was almost impossible during term time. Instead, I kept getting exhausted in the run up to holidays, and then crashing out for a week or two. From this term on (Summer term starts on Monday), I'm thinking about planning 20% of my working time around health and well-being. This seems like a manageable compromise to me. It's not the same as taking one day a week 'off', but it should also help me stay clear-headed and work better without getting exhausted. I'm not sure what this will look like (swimming? Yoga? Walking? Cycling? Personal writing?), but I fully intend to plan in and keep track of time for this every week.

The flip-side of that is actually holding myself to a conventional 9-5 timetable the rest of the time- or at least try! At the moment it's more like 11am to 5pm or 6pm regularly, 8am to 9pm near a deadline, and then a week watching 'Line of Duty' on BBC Iplayer on a full-time basis.

Part four: Passing the 'mini-upgrade' panel

The last hurdle of the year was a 'mini-upgrade' panel, which I had last week. It wasn't a formal upgrade, which will happen at the end of next year, but it means I can come back again in September. Before the panel I was nervous, as I know that sometimes PhD students are asked to re-write and re-submit their work, and in the worst case, failed and ejected from the programme. Although I've never heard of that happening, in theory it's an option. My supervisor's advice before the panel was reassuring, as he confirmed that he has the final say in the outcome and was happy with my project's progress. He said it was a good opportunity to get feedback on my work, and to see how others are reading my work. Also a good opportunity to work out what is useful feedback and what is well-intentioned but not useful feedback. I feel lucky to have a supportive supervisor who doesn't give too much weight to the formal processes and is more focused on the research project.

Talking to students who had gone through the panel earlier in their PhD, they said there were four questions that often come up:



1. What is your research question?
2. What is the unique contribution of this research?
3. What materials, case studies, and/or sites are you looking at?
4. What methodology are you working with?

I wondered why the department didn't provide this type of guidance for the panel, and, as usual, the most helpful information came from my peers and supervisor. On reflection, I think that this might be symptomatic of a lack of consistency across panels. Some people I have spoken with had a very hard time, and others had a really easy ride. It doesn't seem to correlate to the quality of their work, but, more likely, the opinions and personalities of the academics on their panel. Perhaps the department didn't provide any general guidance because it is not a consistent experience.

So, even knowing to expect quite broad questions, I was still worried that I would be grilled on the specific arguments of texts I am working with, or picked up on data analysis, or that the premise and foundations of my project would be deemed outside of disciplinary boundaries or irrelevant. I went on holiday for a few days before the mini-upgrade so I didn't have a lot of time to worry about it though, which worked out really well. You can probably guess by now that the panel went well, but even if it hadn't, I'm not sure there is anything I could have done to prepare for it, as I'd already submitted the chapter over a month ago.

By the morning of the mini-upgrade I was in a good mood, and ready to get it out of the way. Happily, they panelists told me immediately that I had passed, which removed a lot of pressure from the meeting. I got helpful feedback from both panelists, and they were broadly positive and encouraging about my work. The areas that they pushed me on were helpful and inspired me to plan the next stage of my research. The meeting took half the time I was expecting, less than an hour overall, and was pain-free. Contrary to my expectations, the panelists did not expect me to provide detailed responses or clarifications, and the most valuable bit of the meeting was the opportunity to hear them discuss the work with me and each-other. I felt grateful that the panelists had taken the time to read my work and give constructive feedback. Phew!

## Episode 8 June to November 2019

### Field work

The week after my upgrade panel at the end of last academic year Bruno moved to Brazil, and I decided to spend as much of summer there as possible. This was both to spend time with him, and also to make a start on my field work. Having covered a lot of existing academic literature as part of the first chapter of my research, I felt like I needed to sense check the academic work with the real world to shape the direction of my research design.

I went out for two periods of a month each. The first was just to get the lie of the land, and the second was for exploratory field work for my PhD, so I used it to collect data. I feel really lucky that I had the flexibility to do a kind of 'pre-exploratory' phase of the field work, because it meant I was oriented in Brazil and had started to build a network of people, before I began doing the 'field work' itself. The main reason that I classed the second trip as field work and the first not as field work was because I didn't have time to get the paperwork in before the first trip, so I couldn't ethically include anything I collected then in my writing.

How could I do my field work in Brazil even though I wasn't originally planning to do research on Brazil when I started this project? At the time that Bruno and I were deciding about whether it would work for him to take the job in Brazil, I was also designing my research. My research is related to imperial histories, so I knew I would need to carry out research in a postcolonial country. Brazil fitted this criterion. I can also speak Portuguese, so it is feasible for me to research in Brazil. Therefore, the synergy between Bruno's job location and my research plans worked both ways. First, the job location shaped my research because I might have chosen a different postcolonial context otherwise. At the same time, I was supportive of the job in Brazil because I knew I could adapt my research around it without substantively changing the focus or needing to learn a new language. It sounds like a potentially clunky process, forcing my research to fit around the constraint of the context. But, I've actually found it very productive. Since starting to research in Brazil there are additional layers that improve my project that I wasn't looking for before-hand, and wouldn't have found in a different context.

### Preparing for field-work

The first thing I did to prepare for field work was meet with my supervisor. His research style is very empirically-led, so he strongly encouraged me to encounter 'the field' before finalizing any of my research design as he anticipated this would change my research questions substantially. He also recommended collecting enough

information over the summer to spend next year writing it into the second chapter, which i will need to present at the end of year two as part of the upgrade. We agreed to check in during the summer.

In order to carry out field work I had to get a number of approvals from my university department and also the university PhD department. These were:

- ethics review
- Health and Safety review and risk assessment
- field work design and approval
- field work budget approval

It took a month or two to get all the paper-work done, which is why I didn't have time to do it before heading out on the first trip. Mostly it was quite basic and mostly concerned with what information I would be collecting and how, and how it related to my research questions. The ethics review was the most helpful part as it pushed me to think carefully about exactly how I collect information and the levels of consent involved.

Because my PhD is ESRC funded and my university has generous field-work funds I have access to a number of pots of field-work funding. But, because the pots come from different parts of the university they all have different application processes and also norms about accessing the other available pots before accessing their pots. That meant that I got confused and did not get funding approval for my field-work this summer, but I managed to get some of the costs (not all) reimbursed when I got back. Because I was staying with Bruno most of the time, and had moved out of the flat I was renting in the UK, my field work costs were not too high and so this was feasible for me.

Brazil: first visit

For the first few weeks in Brazil I was disoriented and not sure what i could do. I went to some relevant sites for my research, as well as archives and research centres, to get a sense of the environment. But, I didn't feel comfortable enough with my research to arrange any interviews or present myself to people as a researcher. At the same time, I was learning a lot about Brazil just by being there. I had tried to make contacts at the university before arriving but without any luck, and I ended up working in a shared office space where you can rent a desk . I thought I would miss the feeling of being in a university environment, but I actually didn't miss it at all, and it was a real pleasure to be away from campus for a few weeks with a lot more thinking space and time than in term-time. That's where I wrote the reflection below.

## Summer School

After a month in Brazil I came back to Europe for a few weeks due to some previous commitments, including a graduate summer school. This was a chance to build community, and also re-orient my research. I met PhD students from other universities around the world. The two things that stood out to me were the very personal reasons that most people have for being interested in what they're studying. For me it was one of the first times I've thought about how invested I am in the deeper questions that guide my research and it was great to hear about what these questions are for others. The second thing was how different the PhD experience can be from university to university. This goes for the formal structures like supervision and upgrades, as well as the environment and relations between students and students and faculty. Consensus is that my university is known for having a less collegiate atmosphere. I left the summer school determined to invest more time in building close and supportive relationships with my colleagues in the department who I connect with because I think we will really need each other.

In terms of my research the summer school was ideally placed as I'd already spent a month reflecting on my research questions and scoping the sites in Brazil, but up till that point I felt I lacked legitimacy as a researcher to ask the questions. I was really struggling to find a focus and an argument, and a voice as a researcher. The summer school included reflection on our role as academics and what is involved in 'researching', 'analysing' and 'explaining' the world. I don't exactly know what changed for me at the summer school, but when I got back to Brazil I felt more inspired about my research, and also more comfortable with approaching people for interviews and conversations- but not yet sure what my argument and angle is.

## Return to Brazil

When I got back to Brazil for the second part of the summer all my ducks were in a row: I already had a network of people I'd met through friends and the co-working space and by approaching them online; I'd spent the summer school talking about the project and building confidence in my role as a researcher; all my paper-work was signed off- so I was good to go. It was a wildly productive four weeks and I collected a lot of empirical information that I've been writing up since I got back. In the middle of this period I had a crisis of confidence when I started thinking about beginning to write something based on the interviews to present at a conference. I'd had a meeting with an academic who is researching similar areas who asked me: 'what's your stake in this?' 'What makes you angry?' 'What story do you want to tell?', or some of those questions. Questions that I'm asked again and again. My answer up till now is 'I don't know: at the moment I'm just exploring, I just want to see what's there, I don't know what I want to say about it, yet'.

There are two separate questions I suppose: why do you care about this, and what do you want to say about it? I'm really struggling with saying something.

I didn't expect it to be so hard to pick an angle or a focus. I spoke with my supervisor who gave me some advice that was helpful and also unsustainable. He said, 'don't worry about that for now. You have a few more weeks in the field, focus on whatever is interesting you there, and when you get back put your head down and spend three or four days writing a paper for the conference. Don't worry about picking a definitive argument or angle, just pick any point of focus from the material and write something around that - you can change it later'. This was liberating advice at the time, because I could continue to focus on what I was enjoying researching in the field, but I regretted it a few weeks later when I was writing up the paper, He was right that once the time pressure was on it was a lot easier to write the paper. But I was also writing in a rush that completely exhausted me. My main focus at the moment is on pacing my writing.

The field-work was the most transformative part of the PhD experience so far because it changed my perspective on what the important issues are. Being in the field over the summer gave me a different perspective on my research and was very inspiring. I feel more informed about what I'm researching, and it pushed me in some unexpected directions. I'm glad that I could do field work quite early into my PhD so that I can structure the project around my findings, adapting the theory and methodology, rather than just inserting a case study into the project at the end.

Reflection: slow-learning

I'm writing this in a shared working space in Brazil. The summer is amazing because I have so much space and time to reflect on what and how I'm learning, without the demands of seminars and term-time activities.

I'm a slow learner. I realised this in therapy, which I was practicing often over the past couple of years with a therapist, which is a much more deep-rooted type of learning which interrogates our fundamental ways of interacting with the world. On a side note, I really recommend therapy if you can access it and feel it might be helpful for you, especially for PhD students and people working in academia. Given the issues around mental health in academia, I recommend therapy not only for your own well-being, but also because taking responsibility for our own well-being is a necessary step to creating a less combative, competitive, and unduly stressful working environment for everyone around you.

I always thought I was a fast learner, because I'm quick to think of arguments and quick to pick up new pieces of information. I always did well at school. But that is very different from shifting your deep-rooted beliefs. But I'm realising that it is normal to

think that you understand something theoretically, and then only a lot later start to integrate it instinctively into your day-to-day behaviours, or to really feel it to be true, to understand it on an intuitive level.

Where I am going with this is that I have the same types of frustration with my research project. Theoretically, I might think I understand something or am taking a particular approach, but then in my written work I'm constantly contradicting myself, slipping between concepts, or hiding other messages between the lines. Reading other peoples' work critically is basically looking for what they are communicating that they didn't mean to communicate, and then using that to re-interpret what they have written.

This takes me to two places. First, it's no wonder that I, and many others, take critical feedback of our work so personally. Academic work is very personal. Not just because we might sometimes pin our self-worth to external approval, but because your work exposes not just what you think, and the data you've collected, but also what you believe about the world. Implicitly a piece of work communicates my world-view, and probably more of it than I ever intend. My new strategy for dealing with this is not to attempt to distance my 'personal' self from my work, but to remember that my work is just one part of myself (one that does not demonstrate my innate value), and also to accept myself and my work as flawed, inconsistent, and constantly learning, and nevertheless worthy of respect.

The other thing is I'm trying to take a much more patient approach to my work. Four years sounds like a long time to complete a research project, but at this rate it might take me four years to even understand the question I am asking.

And that is also okay. This isn't a GCSE exam that you have to cram for and remember facts, it's an attempt to re-think an existing body of knowledge and add to it. I have to find something that I believe to be 'true' enough to put my name to it, and also feel humble enough to know that a healthy response to it from others will involve totally dismantling it. For me, to really believe something means both knowing it and feeling it to be true. In terms of my constant feeling of being an imposter, it also helps me to remember that I'm not an expert, and that's not what I'm aiming for. I'm just learning out-loud.



## Episode 9

November and December 2019

### UK. Change of gear.

I'm back in the rainy UK after the summer in Brazil doing field work. It's a dramatic contrast, especially because Bruno is in Brazil and so it's strange being apart from him.

I was happy that in the welcome back talk the department organised for us they invited someone from the Well-being department. The speaker talked about the emotional challenges of doing a PhD and flagged that returning from field work can be one of them, either because of disturbing research, or the difficulty of settling back into the day to day. I thought about the majority of my colleagues on the program, who are mainly not from the UK, and how daunting it must be for them to establish a new life in a place they don't know that is far away from their families, friends and support network.

### Presenting at conferences

One of the first things I did after getting back from Brazil was to present at an academic conference. I wrote a paper using the empirics I had collected. It felt very different presenting original data than making a more theoretical argument, and I was more comfortable because I felt like I was presenting findings and not just my own opinions.

I was nervous about presenting anyway and really happy that some of my friends came to support me. It made a big difference having supportive faces in the room and it made me understand the importance of having a community with the other PhD students.

Since then I presented at another conference. I got feedback at both conferences from the panel discussant, as well as questions from the audience. The feedback was useful. One thing was that I am getting recurring questions on my research, and the more times I get asked them the more comfortable I feel formulating a response. The second discussant also pointed me towards some relevant literature, which was very helpful, and recommended that I tone down on the claim to originality in my research.

This is a recurrent thing I keep seeing in other people's work in progress that I read: it's very difficult to defend a claim to being the first or only person to be doing something. In my experience I only make that claim when I don't know enough about the work other people have already done. So it was a helpful reminder.

On a couple of occasions this term I've acted as discussant for other peoples' work, which was also an eye-opening experience. It was a good opportunity to practice giving constructive feedback to other people, and engage meaningfully with their work. In addition, it was interesting to see other peoples' work in progress because it's nowhere near as polished as the final papers you read after publication. It takes a whole team of people to get one person's work to that stage. It also gave me more of a sense of the generosity of discussants who've given my feedback on my work. Being a discussant was trickier than I imagined, partly because I was commenting on work

written by people in more senior positions than me, and so I was conscious of not offending anyone and especially of not appearing to have mis-read their work. From my experience, a lot of time and thought goes into providing helpful feedback.

The most valuable thing about the conferences, though, was the opportunity to feel part of a community. I felt this a lot at the conferences. It was good to talk and drink and eat with other people, PhD students mainly, and to hear other academics doing similar research. I also tweeted about the conferences which meant I expanded my online community. Like a lot of people, I have mixed feelings about Twitter, but it is also a helpful way of keeping track of people doing similar work.

### **End of term one: teaching and other work**

In terms of transitioning from the first to the second year of the PhD it feels like a huge step up, with a lot of new responsibilities and expectations. At the same time, I think a lot of the hard work of orienting myself was done in the first year. Looking at the new cohort of PhDs joining the department this year I remember how unsure of myself I felt last year, and I wonder if they are feeling like that now and if there's anything I can do to minimise that feeling for them.

The longer I spend in academia the more it feels ruthlessly hierarchical, and the first year PhDs are the bottom of the ladder. It can feel like all the anxiety in the industry lands on their shoulders. I've been to so many seminars, talks and workshops this year where the more junior people are the ones asking the most interesting questions, but only the senior people seem at all comfortable in the room. I wonder if you get to a point in your career when the anxiety dissipates, or if you just learn to hide it, or manage it. And that's no bad thing, as long as the way of managing it isn't by piling it on everyone else.

### **Teaching**

I took on a couple of additional new responsibilities this term, including teaching. I'm teaching a seminar group of first-year undergraduates an introductory course. It consists of one hour face to face teaching a week, plus planning time, office hours, marking, emails, administration. And I'm doing additional workshops and observations to get a PgCert qualification. I would guess I've averaged one to two full days every week this term on teaching, taking all of that into account. This is a huge amount of behind the scenes work for what looks on the surface like a very small commitment. As the term has gone on I've tried to spend less and less time preparing for the seminars in order to minimise the work-load. So I hope the teaching work-load will keep going down next term. But there's no getting around the fact that it's a lot of work.

Part of teaching in a university environment has been learning to teach and getting feedback on my teaching. I've had two observations of my classes this year, one from my department which they do for all new teachers, and one as part of the PgCert course. We also sent out an end of term feedback survey to the students with a rating system, which was nerve-wracking.

Overall, the feedback I received was very positive and also helpful for supporting me in improving my teaching practice. It was reassuring that both the academic observations were largely positive. They also both suggested that I can move away from a tightly planned and controlled session to a more free-flowing discussion. The thing for me now is building the confidence to do that. I like to feel that I've got a handle on the class dynamic at all times and tend to stick to pre-planned discussions and exercises. This comment came up in student feedback as well, so it's definitely something I want to work on.

Student feedback was also very positive, thank goodness. By the time I sent out the survey towards the end of term I didn't have the capacity to take any criticism at all, so I was relieved more than anything that the feedback was good.

I'm planning to discuss the substantive points with the students in seminar next year because I'll have the same group. The main thing I want to talk through with them is that some students asked for more explanations of the key points, and some asked for more discussion and more challenging seminars. I want to talk it through with them to get their take on how we can incorporate more explanation as well as more opportunities for them to push themselves and learn through discussion with each-other. I also see it as an opportunity to be explicit about my pedagogy- which is a piece of advice I got this year. By showing students that the sessions are planned around balancing a variety of learning styles I hope they will get a better understanding of why I plan the sessions the way I do.

Despite the work involved in teaching, it's been absolutely one of the most fun and rewarding things I've done so far as part of the PhD. I love the enthusiasm of the students who are engaging with academic work on the subject for the first time ever and have about a million questions and ideas. There's a lot of curiosity and passion coming from them. Because they're an international group of students with mixed backgrounds there are so many perspectives in the seminar group. I feel that part of my role is enabling students to maintain their own voice and perspective, at the same time as giving them a crash course in the vocabulary of the discipline they're studying.

### **Other work**

On top of the teaching, I took on additional responsibilities in the academic journal that I work at. These are a mix of administrative and editorial responsibilities. I love my work at the journal, the community it connects me with, and the opportunities it gives for creative engagements with the discipline. At the moment, this role takes up about three working days a week. Together with the two days on teaching that's been taking up all of my time, so I'm trying to bring the teaching down to one day a week and block out a day in my diary each week for my research. I'm thinking about the journal work as a service to the academic community, and a good way to build a professional

network. The role is a one year role. It's a serious compromise to the amount of time I can dedicate to my own research this year, but I hope to make that up in the final two years of the PhD.

## February 2020

It's the first weeks of the new term. With the break over the Christmas period I realised that I was putting too much pressure on myself and working too much. I took on a lot of new things at once last term, which constituted the most challenging part of the PhD to date. In the past couple of weeks three different friends in the same stage of the PhD told me they're wondering whether academia is right for them. So I think we're all feeling the added pressure this year.

For me, I still feel like academia is right for me as a career, but I'm looking for ways I can do it better. I mean ways I can work in academia and maintain a work-life balance, take care of my mental-health, and have a level of security. Maybe it's not possible, or maybe it is possible with a lot of work. There are some things I'm doing at the moment, like working from home one or two days a week, leaving at 16.00 when I can, talking regularly with my therapist, exercising a couple of times a week, yoga, and yesterday I had a deep tissue massage to get the laptop knots out of my shoulders. There's literally an army of care-givers involved in keeping me ticking along.

The reason for all of these practices is partly that I need it to not feel drained, and also that I've been finding I can't write when I'm stressed. Or maybe I can write, but I can't think. Writing is really fundamental for the phd, but it also feels like the most intangible bit- how do you learn to come up with an idea out of the air and put it on paper? Obviously reading other people's work is a major part of that but something also needs to click in your head to take the work in an original direction. Without a clear head I can't think creatively at all, and I get stuck in a loop of anxiety.

## Writing

I wrote a paper over the summer based on the research I'd been carrying out in Brazil, and presented that at the conferences I wrote about in December. Through that research and writing I started exploring my research questions in depth and seeing how they changed when faced with empirical material. That process opened up the research questions and made a lot of the research project change as I began to see things that I hadn't thought about before when I was mostly reading books. Because of that I started the second year with a much looser idea of the project than I ended the first idea with. So I was planning to start shutting the research questions down again and settling on a definitive structure for the project last term. I gave myself until January to do that, and now it's February, and I can't say for sure whether I've done that or not.

Last semester I was worrying a lot that I wasn't writing enough. With teaching and working there just didn't seem to be enough time in the day. At the same time I saw about two or three academics giving talks about the value of writing a little bit every-day, as opposed to 'binge-writing'. I've spent my whole life binge-writing (basically, writing intensely in the period before the deadline), and I've always felt like it doesn't do any damage to my work, even if it does do damage to my state of mind.

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These speakers strongly advised against binge-writing because it's less productive overall compared to writing a bit every day. They recommended blocking out one to two hours in your diary daily to focus on your own work. The thing I really enjoyed about one of the talks I attended was that the academic said they'd never had a time in their life that they weren't in some kind of existential crisis, related to work or family, and that keeping up their writing in these periods was essential. I don't know what it was that resonated with me about that. I guess that life doesn't stop so that you can write in peace.

I tried to follow the approach of writing every day and planning in time, and I made some very complicated colour-coded spreadsheets to keep track of my writing, but it didn't feel like it was helping at all. I almost never managed to actually sit down in the times I'd blocked out and write. I was also planning my working day without any dead time (time moving from building to building, time having a coffee, time chatting with a friend about their plans for teaching this week...) so my spreadsheets were helpful for keeping track of my commitments in a week, but not an accurate measure of the time I would actually need to fulfil them. Missing the targets every day made me feel like a failure. And I started working later into the evenings and then sleeping later, getting up later, having less time to work, and feeling like a mouse on a treadmill.

The thing I am taking from the approach, though, is to prioritise time for my own work and writing on my project and to recognise that it should be a priority. For now, I'm blocking out a couple of times a week to work on my project. I'm also planning on not teaching or working on the journal next academic year, so that will free up a lot more time for writing.

In January I met with my supervisor to talk with him about my worries that my project hasn't been progressing in the past few months and that I haven't been writing much. He was very reassuring, and said that from his perspective my project has progressed a lot in ways that I'm not noticing. It's true when he explained what he meant I saw that in terms of the ideas and arguments they have moved on a lot in the past few months.

He also gave me some good advice about creative process which was figuring out what I have done in the past that's helped me make work I like and try and do more of that. I found it very freeing advice because it gave me permission to pursue my own curiosity again. After the meeting I sat down and drew up a draft of what a chapter plan could look like, which does actually look like it could be a chapter plan. So maybe I did end up structuring my project.

I need to submit a chapter at the end of this year for my upgrade. I also have a couple of conference presentations coming up in the next few months. This time it isn't realistic for me to write the chapter or paper in the two weeks before the deadline (like I have every time till now) because with the teaching and the other work it would be physically impossible, so the writing has to start now.



## Episode 10

### June 2020 - Covid-19

At the end of the last instalment in February I was preparing to present at a number of conferences in 2020, and planning for six months of field work. It's only four months since then, but it feels like a lot longer because everything has changed so much. Luckily, I am well and healthy, and so are my family and loved ones. I also feel lucky to still have some job stability, at two years through my funded PhD it will be at least a couple of years before I am back in the job market. I know a lot of people don't have certainty about their job or health, and especially for people who are also involved in anti-racist campaigning this is a really hard time.

I'm not sure where to begin because so much has happened in the last four months. So I'll just start with where I am today, which is sick of everything. For the first time since starting the PhD I'm really wondering if it's right for me. In February I was reflecting on this, and felt that on-balance academia was right for me, but now I don't feel that conviction at all. My will to study and work has gone on holiday.

This is basically because, although I've been lucky to find pockets of engaged and supportive community, I keep feeling like the working culture is based on point-scoring, competition, and being at odds with one another rather than working collaboratively. This is my experience at the moment, not a comment on the wider sector, and I'm so demoralised by what feels like hostility from all sides. I won't go too much into this, because it is more to do with the other work I've been involved in linked with academic networks, publishing and institutional politics, and not specifically my PhD research. My aim next year is to hand-over as many of these responsibilities as possible and focus on my project.

What's good? Other things are going well. After a few months of uncertainty, both personal and linked to the project, I'm starting to have some clarity about the future. As always, my supervisor is very supportive and has been great helping me work things out related to Covid-19. The teaching year is over now and I was commended by the school for excellent teaching and student feedback. This meant a lot to me because of how much I enjoyed teaching last year.

## Covid-19

In March when Covid-19 became a global pandemic there were a few weeks of total mayhem. From one day to another my university switched all face-to-face teaching to an online platform. The same week, a major conference at which I had been scheduled to present and co-host an event was cancelled a few days before-hand, and after some of my colleagues were already en-route to the destination. The university banned all travel for research purposes, including field work. It also sent out a call for teaching assistant applications for 2020-2021, and then followed with an email saying they likely wouldn't be able to hire anyone.

On a teaching front, it was nuts, because I had students emailing me with sincere apologies saying that they couldn't make the seminar because they had Covid symptoms, or their family was sick, or because they were making constant visits to their embassies in an attempt to be re-patriated. Other students lost reliable internet connections when they travelled to their family homes, and other students didn't manage to travel and spent weeks isolating alone in tiny university accommodation rooms.

I felt bad for the students because the university decided that their assessments would go ahead online. I don't think this was fair, because the assessments will reflect how well students are able to perform during a global crisis, which will depend on how directly affected they are by the crisis, which is down to luck as well as class, race, and a host of other things.

Switching to online teaching meant coming up with new teaching strategies for synchronous and asynchronous learning. Students had a lot of questions and uncertainties. So I spent much more time than usual responding to individual queries. I was really touched by some students who made contact to thank me for being supportive and understanding.

I was also surprised that they said many of their teachers hadn't been understanding; for example, refusing to give extensions to formative deadlines even under the circumstances. On the one hand this is fair enough by the teachers- I did more work than I was paid to do in order to support students, and that's not sustainable for teachers either. The transition to online teaching entailed more work for both the teachers and the students to adapt. I hope that universities that continue with online or hybrid teaching next academic year provide appropriate support and resources to both students and teachers. But, in what feels like an increasing commercialisation of universities and an increasing reliance on hourly paid teaching staff with little job security, I would be surprised if universities give the

support they need to. On top of which, everyone in university administration department is under additional pressure because of a likely fall in enrolments this September.

In March, when travel restrictions started coming into place, Bruno travelled back to the UK from Brazil temporarily. We thought it would be just a few weeks, but we've been isolating with his family for almost four months now. It was strange at first but I think we've all settled into it and are more or less able to do our own work.

Working 'remotely' is strange and I miss the face-to-face interactions with my colleagues and friends when we talk about our research. I have a video-call with some colleagues once a week where we all write silently on the phone for 45 minutes, then take a five-minute break to chat. It's a nice way to stay in touch but it doesn't replace being in a room together. A friend of mine who is also a PhD student said to me that her routine hasn't changed very much, because she always spent most of her time writing alone at home any way. That's completely the opposite of my experience of the PhD where it feels like I spend the majority of my time in workshops, seminars and meetings with other people. Even Bruno, who has seen me on the phone so much during the past few weeks, is shocked that this is not at all how he imagined my working life.

The good thing about working remotely has been that I have a lot more time for writing. I've gotten into better writing habits than at any other time in the PhD, and am managing to spend at least an hour a day on my research project- when I can concentrate on it!

In February, my biggest worry was not dedicating enough time to my own writing. Being away from campus, and also having fewer teaching and other commitments in the summer term, has meant that I am redressing the balance between time on my project and other time. I'm really enjoying this. Now the problem isn't finding time for writing, but clearing my mind enough to focus. On balance, it's a definite improvement.

In relation to my project, I had planned five months of field work this year, and more next year, which have all been indefinitely postponed. This is a major upheaval to the project. The topic that I'm studying is directly affected by the pandemic, so it feels like shooting at a moving object. There's a chance that things will clear up and I will be able to do the field work later, especially now that I am planning to move to Brazil (see below). But at least at first it was very unclear whether this would be possible.

There are also ethical concerns about limiting international travel during the pandemic. Because of that I've come up with a back-up plan for my research, which is less ethnographically-informed and more focused on existing literature and theory-building. I will still work with interviews, and try to carry these out mostly online. It feels like a loss, because the fieldwork is a part of the PhD that I am most animated by. I didn't want to be a researcher that mostly reads books, I wanted to be a researcher that is in the world. That might still be possible more than I thought if I move to Brazil.

A big change arising from Covid is that the requirement for graduate students to be present on campus next academic year has been lifted at my university. Because of this, I've decided to move to Brazil with Bruno. The good thing about this is that I will likely have more opportunities for field work that I would have done otherwise. So maybe it's worked out well. I'm hoping to make connections with a university there and maybe act as a visiting scholar. This would help me feel part of a community, learn from academics in Brazil, and also, I think it would be good on my CV.

I had been planning to carry-out research in two or more countries, and I don't think that will be possible now, but at least I should still be able to research in Brazil. Another positive outcome of Covid is that I may be eligible for a six-month funded extension on my PhD. This is necessary because the past few months have thrown me and the project into disarray.

### **Changes to the project and the upgrade**

Apart from postponing the field-work and coming up with a number of back-up plans for the research project because of Covid, the project was changing anyway for its own reasons. I've had two sets of advice about field work. One is to do the theory part of your project before embarking on field work so that you know what you're doing in the field. The other is to do field work as soon as possible so that your theory is led by the empirics. I did an exploratory period of field work last year, and it challenged a lot of my assumptions about the research. So I'm glad I went for field work earlier rather than later. What it meant, though, is that the research project I submitted last year for my mini-upgrade was very different to the research project I submitted for upgrade this year, which confused the panellists.

I'm in an unsettling period of the research where I can see the problems with how I initially designed the project, but I haven't come up with alternative formulations. Even though we had a short extension on the deadline for submitting the documents for the upgrade panel because of Covid-19, I still felt like I was submitting something very quickly pulled together, and still with more questions than answers.

My experience of the upgrade panel was mixed. Before the upgrade panel my supervisor submitted a recommendation to the panellists to upgrade me. During the upgrade panel the panellists had a number of

questions about the project, its main focus, and the changes since last year. They felt that the project was more coherent a year ago, which it was, but for me, and for my supervisor, it is a better project this year, even though it hasn't come together yet.

The panel lasted an hour and a half. I felt like I wasn't able to answer all of the questions that the panellists asked me in a way that satisfied them. They asked me how I am planning to carry out the research, given the restrictions on travel at the moment, and I told them what my plans are. But they weren't convinced. At the end of their questions, they asked if I had any questions. I asked if there were elements of the project that they think are working well at the moment, but they didn't give me any positive feedback. I asked if they would upgrade me, and they were noncommittal. After the panel I de-briefed with my supervisor, who said the panellists were undecided about whether to upgrade me or not.

A few weeks later I received the panel report, which did upgrade me. The feedback in the report is helpful for me in improving my research project going forward, and also for seeing which bits of the project are not clear and those that are easy to understand at the moment. The panellists implied that they are upgrading me based on faith in me and my supervisor rather than the state of the project at the moment.

Since the upgrade panel, I have been feeling demoralised about my research project. I know that critical feedback is essential for improving the project, and I'm grateful for the feedback. At the same time, my confidence in my ability as a researcher has become very low, and I'm doubting my ability to complete the PhD or write something that is publishable. I wish that the panellists would have given me a more balanced set of positive and negative feedback, and also that they could have been empathetic about the circumstances of changing the project massively due to Covid-19.

### **In conclusion**

At the end of the second academic year of my PhD, my confidence is low in terms of my ability to write and publish academic work, as well as the opportunities to work collaboratively with other people in a supportive environment. The things I'm enjoying and feel confident about are teaching and reading. The things I'm looking forward to are spending less time on commitments other than my project next year, researching in Brazil, and hopefully getting to know scholars there too. Basically, getting away from this university!



## Episode 11

### December 2020

At the end of the last instalment in June my commitment to the PhD was at an all-time low as I questioned my ability to complete it, and also my wishes to work in a sector that I felt was beating me up. I was ready to escape to Brazil to focus on my field work and live with Bruno, getting away from the teaching and administrative burdens in the academy.

That was six months ago and pretty much everything has changed.

The first main change was that Bruno and I broke up. So, the idea of moving to Brazil by myself in the middle of a pandemic was not something I wanted to do. I've been feeling heartbroken, but at the same time it's made me see that a lot of the elements of the PhD that I wanted to escape from have actually sustained me and provided me with a routine and consistency.

Instead of going on field work I moved in with a friend and have been teaching at the university again this term. I've postponed my field work till the teaching year is done in April, when hopefully it will be possible to travel again. There's nothing I can say about the breakup except it is extremely painful and has ripple on effects in all parts of my life, including my research plans which were mixed up in my personal plans. It will take a while to settle things back into place.

### Field work plans and overall timeline

My research was severely disrupted by Covid, and I had to delay essential field work by 12 months. Earlier this year the UKRI guaranteed a six-month extension to ESRC funded students whose research is impacted by the pandemic. But a couple of weeks ago they back tracked on this commitment, advising students to redesign their research projects instead. However, I am still planning to apply for a six-month extension to my PhD submission date and aim to secure other funding. There might be some available at my university. That means that I'm working on the assumption I'll take four and a half years to complete my PhD, meaning that I am just coming up to the halfway mark.

I'm planning to go on field work in April next year (2021), but I'm not sure what this will entail. I'm meeting my supervisor next week and will talk this through with him. Meanwhile, I have changed the focus of my research just out of the necessity to focus on theory-building over the past few months, and I'm starting to feel more confident in this area of the research.

## Writing

Now I have passed my upgrade I don't have to submit anything to the department until the end of my PhD. My supervisor recommended I focus on writing an academic article for publication at this point. This will be a chapter of the PhD in the end, but for now to write something as a stand-alone paper (rather than focusing on the larger project) because this will be important on my CV in order to get a job after the PhD. We set December as a deadline to have a draft ready and it is possible that I might make this deadline depending on what counts as a 'draft'. I have an idea and I have started working on it, I think it will take shape into a paper.

The last time I met my supervisor we talked in general about the writing process. I realised that I am afraid of my writing being read. I'm afraid of looking stupid. I was also struggling to prioritise writing and make time for it. On a subconscious level the two probably went hand in hand. My supervisor had a lot of helpful advice, but the most important thing for me was just talking through how I'd been feeling and some of my fears with him. I felt a lot better after the conversation.

My supervisor had some practical advice, like writing in the mornings before doing other work. He also said that he and a lot of others work evenings and weekends to get their writing done, because other commitments take up the rest of their time. This still isn't something I feel comfortable doing, but it makes sense to me that people who are writing prolifically are also making choices that enable them to do this. This means I don't lack the ability; I might just be making different choices. He also advised figuring out whatever helps me to write and doing that. For example, if it helps to write in the evening with a glass of wine then do that. He also recommended a book on how to write. I've ordered it but it hasn't arrived yet. I realised that with all the research methods that we've been taught on the PhD programme, no one taught us how to write a book, or how scary that is.

There's a basic fact which is that work takes work, and honestly, I hadn't been putting the time in to work on my writing. I was expecting to produce finished papers without the discipline to toil on writing them. At the same time, my fears were inhibiting me from writing. I talked this through with another mentor figure who said he also feels afraid that his work won't be understood in the way he intends it, but that sometimes someone reads it who it connects with, and that is just as important.

On the writing side I've been aiming to write (or read for my project) for an hour or two every morning before checking my emails or anything else. I keep track of it in a star chart. On an emotional level I've been meditating (including a course of meditation for writer's block and procrastination!) to become more aware of the subconscious and emotional factors at play that might facilitate or inhibit my writing.

### **Learning how to work and writing for publication**

This article by Virginia Valian resonates a lot with my challenges with academic writing:

<http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/genderequity/repository/files/gep-workshop-materials/1977workingItOut.pdf> . Valian also follows an approach based on working for a set time every day (for her she starts with five minutes and builds up to 15 minutes, then increases these in 15-minute blocks). The key to Valian's approach is based on enjoying the process of writing and attempting to disentangle writing from the ego. Valian writes that oftentimes academic work becomes embroiled in competitive 'kill or be killed' ego processes, whereby subconsciously the writer can feel that by succeeding they will attract jealousy and kill others, and by failing they die. In contrast, Valian attempts to focus on the process of writing, and to cultivate a sense of writing for her own enjoyment. In this sense 'ability is not important' and the work does not reflect on the author's worth as a person. In fact, the value of the work is two-fold, one to work for money, but equally important to work for the enjoyment gained from gaining a greater understanding of the research question. Importantly, Valian writes about the challenge of finishing a project, and of committing to an idea for long enough to see it through. Valian suggests that by writing as a continuous process, the anticipation of beginning the next project can act as an incentive to finish a current project.

Now that I am trying to write a paper for publication, I found Valian's advice helpful. I've written a number of iterations of papers for workshops and conferences over the past two years but have always felt dissatisfied with these and started again with a blank document for the next one. This works for me to an extent, because the ideas are still moving on in my head, so I don't need to go back and re-work them based on exactly how I wrote them out last time. But it also feels frustrating to keep producing first-drafts and I ask myself when I will have a paper that is good enough. I'm afraid of sending the paper to journals and the paper will be rejected. I'm afraid of even sending a paper to my friends.

One thing I have found from trying to write (or read specifically for my project) for an hour or two a day is that I am really looking forward to this time, and I work hard to protect it. I don't make meetings in the morning. No matter how urgent my other commitments I put them off, and it means the hours that I spend on my project are my favourite part of the day. One that I look forward to every day. When I catch myself feeling anxious about producing a paper I try and hold faith that I will get there, and I have to have a bit of respect for my pace. It is more important for me now that I get into the habit and process of writing than that I finish something quickly.

### **Faith in the academy - online communities**

Reading back on my last entry, I had lost a little faith in academia in general and felt disillusioned about the individuality, pettiness and nastiness of people. I really think this has been exacerbated by the pandemic and we're all just having a hard time... We're all just acting out and treading on each-others' toes without meaning to. I've just

come from my university's branch of the UCU meeting which was like an episode of the Thick of It, the factionalism and passive-aggression hung so thick in the air - I was gasping in shock at the rude tone and my housemate (who was in the room) had to ask if I was okay.

Despite all that I really feel replenished since last time and feel a lot of love for the university and academic world. I went to an online version of the summer school that made a big impact on me last year, and I was also involved in hosting an online conference. Both of these weeks were fulfilling intellectually, and I was so happy to see people I know and like professionally and personally. Thinking about the Valian article again, I always remember that the motivation for doing this work has to be because it's what I want to do. I want to research, I want to study, I want to write. It won't give me much other than the process, and it can take a lot away from me if I pin my hopes on external recognition or the acceptance of a community that can't agree on what time to hold a weekly meeting.

## **Episode 12**

**January 2021**

### **Two-week holiday during Covid lockdown**

4pm the first Monday back after a two-week holiday and I'm sitting on a bench in my local park, on the cusp of darkness. January 2021! There is nowhere else to go... except the supermarket. Or the tool shop.

I took the holiday over the festive period and it flew by. Before the holiday I wondered what it would be like to take a holiday while we're locked down and with no-where to go. Would it be relaxing? Refreshing at all? It really was! I slept as much as possible every night, lay in till midday, took long walks by myself, visited the local parks, took long walks with friends and family. Had an argument with my housemate, made up, got drunk together, spent the next day watching children's movies together and eating takeaway. Spent the day after that watching children's movies together and eating a home cooked meal.

I didn't pick up a book once, except to read a fiction book front to back in the bath, drop it in the bath, and dry it on the radiator. I got bored once, and I got some things that were bothering me out of my system. I spent time reflecting on 2020 and let it go.

Just before the holiday I talked with a friend who completed her viva this summer. It was a huge achievement, but she didn't give herself a chance to rest or to celebrate. In September she started a one-year fellowship, to tide her

through while she looks for jobs for next year. She told me that it was surreal finishing the PhD, and not much really changing. She finished the PhD and then still worked in the same chair in the same room, teaching online, researching the same things. And building up her stomach for job rejections.

Talking with my friend made me see how it's always hard to know when to take a break in this career, but especially at the moment. Last year was so strange, because it was exhausting, but it was hard to see what was so exhausting about it. Physically, a lot of the activity was taken out, like the commute, for example. But mentally the uncertainty and grief took a lot of energy. And especially for anyone with losses bigger than mine. I felt lucky at the end of the year to have my health and a healthy family.

This morning I woke up dreaming about being pregnant, which is a good omen for a creative year. I wasn't excited to check my emails, but I was excited to sit down and read again.

### **The difficult middle period**

I met a friend in the holiday for a walk. He completed his PhD three years ago, and after a spate of term-time teaching contracts he's just got a well-funded post-doc. The post doc is in another country and he is very happy about it except that he has just got into a serious relationship with someone in the UK and they are now working out how to make it work long distance (in the midst of a global pandemic!), and how long they can manage it for. So he's already applying for positions back in the U.K.

I told him about my doubts about being able to complete the PhD at all, and how scared I was about writing anything and publishing it. He said he remembered that stage of the PhD and that he had become quite depressed in the middle. But he said that he was the worst person to ask for advice because he wouldn't advise anyone to do a PhD at all. He said that after finishing the PhD things just got harder, that he had been naive about expecting to be able to get an academic job after the PhD, and had ended up moving to a city he didn't like as it was the only place he could get work, and commuting home at the weekends. He did have some good advice though which was that it had really helped him to take a placement at another university in his final year, that it helped him clear his mind and write up.

The reassuring thing for me about the conversation was that it made me see that he had found the PhD emotionally challenging as well, and that the doubts and isolation are a part of the process.



## Positives about 2020

Despite all of the challenges in 2020 there are things that I really enjoyed and feel grateful for. One of the big things for me has been the relationship with my supervisor. My supervisor has been very consistently available for me the whole year and supportive of me as a person as well as my work. I think because of the pandemic we've talked about things we wouldn't normally talk about, like health and living situations. He's been very open to talking about that with me and has provided helpful advice, including about writing that I wrote about in the previous installment. Also, this year I've found a number of professional relationships more tense than usual as everyone is stressed and out of their depth. I've been able to ask my supervisor for advice about this as well. At the end of the year I think of him as a kind of uncle figure and I feel very lucky about that.

In terms of my academic work, I've appreciated my supervisor's approach more and more. We met just before the Christmas break and he had very pragmatic advice. First, he advised me to do what works for me with the research. So if it doesn't work for me now to carry out fieldwork (because of the pandemic and also because I don't want to spend time in Brazil now because my relationship ended), then that is fine. I can adapt the research project so that it doesn't involve field work. That was very alleviating. He also said (like my friend did later) that if I wanted to spend a few months at another institution for a change of scene then that could also be a good option.

I decided to take until March to re-assess and make a plan. In March my teaching will end and maybe the world will be in a different state.

My supervisor also reiterated the importance of working on an article for publication. So, between now and March I'm going to focus on writing an article. I really want to write a paper by March so that I have something concrete and so that it can help me see what the next step of my research is. Whether the next step is field work, or whether there's an academic or institution I should visit, will depend on whatever direction the paper ends up in as well. In a more substantive way, I appreciate more and more how my supervisor has let me keep the research question open and work closely with the empirics. This is very different to the course I attended at my university set up to encourage you to start with a methodology and pre-defined terms of research and theory. I like working with a less rigid process, even though I am worried now that it won't lead to results.

Another big change that has been positive as well as challenging this year has been the cancellation of a lot of conferences, seminars, and even field work. I was disappointed that a lot of what I was looking forward to this year was cancelled, especially some exciting trips, and opportunities to meet other scholars and see friends and colleagues. A lot of people are frustrated that these haven't been happening as they were important opportunities to build professional networks, and I feel that too.

Other people have made a big effort to take part in online conferences and networks, and I've done this a bit. But I don't honestly enjoy spending a lot of time on Zoom. So I've tried to limit this, even if it means missing out on networking opportunities.

But one thing that I quite appreciate about this year is that it cut out so many of the activities that were filling up my time and enabled me to strip the PhD back to a much more bare bones experience of reading and writing. Especially if I take field work out of my research project, the PhD becomes a much quieter, simpler, and in some ways more manageable project.

This is the main thing I am proud of myself for this year in terms of my PhD: making writing a part of my daily routine. This year I set up a desk to write at and formed the habit of reading or writing for my research project every day. In the past I only wrote to deadlines. I've realised that a lot of the things that I enjoy about research, like talking with people, are only one part of what I love about studying, and that the basic solitary practice of reading and writing is also extremely fulfilling for me. It's very likely that the UK is going into another month or more of lockdown now, and it is comforting for me to think that I can write for at least a couple of hours every day. The basic core of my job is something I can enjoy anyway under almost any circumstances.

On the whole I feel like I get so much out of the PhD, and that's more than enough reason to do it.

## Episode 13

### May 2021. Summer term, third year.

It's the summer term of the third year of my PhD. It's hard to believe how quickly this year has passed, and the two years before that. I've heard that a lot of PhD students reach the end of the third year and wonder where the time went, and I can only imagine that this is exacerbated by the past 12 months being in a global pandemic.

I applied for and was granted a six month funded extension due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, I have a fourth funded year of my PhD. This means that unlike many PhD programmes in the UK which run for three years, I will have four and a half funded years in total. This means that I still have over a year and a half of my PhD, so I'm not panicking yet.

### Impact of the pandemic on my research

Because of the pandemic this year, I haven't been able to carry out the six months of ethnographically informed field work that was meant to be the primary source of data collection for my PhD. With the situation changing country by country and every few months it hasn't been clear whether or not I would be able to do any of this field work, and I still don't know.

For the time being I am focusing on writing a theory and ethics focused paper, which will be an introductory chapter of my PhD. I hope that by writing this paper I will get clarity on the focus of my PhD, and also that by the time I've finished writing it, it might be possible to travel for research again. At the same time, if I finish this chapter and it's not possible to travel then I will have to commit to writing a more text-focused PhD that doesn't rely on in-person data collection. I know that a lot of people are carrying out interviews on Zoom, but honestly this doesn't appeal to me at all. Another option is changing the sites that I carry out research in in order to travel to a place that has looser Covid restrictions. The places I had planned to carry out field work are currently on the UK 'red list' of countries that you shouldn't travel to.

Aside from field work, most institutions have suspended their study abroad programmes. Again, I was thinking about applying to study in the US or Australia for a semester, and I'm not sure if this will be possible now. But I'm not ready to rule it out yet.

It was difficult working on the PhD this year because it has been even more isolated than usual. I hope that is starting to change. A lot of PhD students at my university left the city during the pandemic, and a few of them are starting to return now. Because campus and libraries are opening up again we've been meeting up on campus for the past couple of weeks. It's been really nice working around other people again and taking tea and coffee breaks together.

I've also been keeping in touch with some friends from the PhD by WhatsApp, and some of us have met up to go to the pub. I've hardly met any of the most recent cohort of PhD students in the department, and I really wonder what this year must have been like for them...

### **Writing and presentations**

Since January I've been really focused on discipline in writing. It is working and I am in a good writing routine. I write almost every day for an hour to two. I have noticed that planning my writing paragraph by paragraph helps me to know what to focus on each day. I've made a spreadsheet to keep track of what I'm meant to be writing about, and how long I write for each day. I also put important deadlines into the spreadsheet.

I've got two conference presentations and two symposiums in my diary this summer. Three in June, and one in September. They're all scheduled to be held online. Having these deadlines in my diary is motivating me to write. In April I also made two presentations, but I felt under-prepared for both of them, so I'm especially keen to have written a paper I'm happy with for the next round of presentations.

I hope that after three rounds of feedback on my paper at the panels in June I will be able to make edits to it and submit it to a journal for publication. This will be the first time I submit a paper for publication. My supervisor is very keen for me to focus on publishing a paper during my PhD, and on prioritising publishing a paper over and above the PhD thesis itself. This is because the academic publishing process can take over 12 months, and because it's essential to have a publication to be considered for entry level jobs in academia. That means I need to be publishing very soon to have a publication before I enter the job market. When I think too much about publishing a paper I feel scared, so for myself I'm just trying to focus on the process of writing, and I hope that writing will lead to a paper.

### **Teaching**

The teaching year has finished, except for the students' final exams. I'm not involved in grading the summative work, so for me the teaching year has finished. This year I was teaching the same introductory course that I taught last year, but with two groups, and online for part of the year. I gained confidence as a teacher, and now feel comfortable in my teaching style. I'm also studying for the second part of my PgCert qualification. The PGCert involves designing a module. I'm enjoying designing a module based on my research interests.

I won't be teaching next academic year because I need to focus on my research and writing. And, in case travel becomes possible again, I would like to have the flexibility to go on field work at short notice.

Because I won't be teaching next year I need to either subsidise my grant with an alternative source of income or save money. Part of the appeal of going on field work is that I could sublet my rented room and save money on rent. This is because I have a field work fund available to me while I am on field work. This would mean I don't have to do as much paid work. But, because I can't rely on being able to go on field work, I can't plan my budget around this.

Another option is to earn money another way, that is less time consuming than teaching. So far, I have taken on two pieces of research assistant work. One of them involves scanning things in the archives, and is not demanding, so is ideal for some income on the side that does not distract me from my writing. The other work might be more demanding as it involves preliminary data collection for a colleague's research. But, I hope that the experience of working as a research assistant will be useful for me in the future and maybe look good on my CV.

### Reflecting

Overall, at the end of this academic year, I feel disoriented, if not a little lost, and I'm struggling to come to terms with not being able to carry out the PhD in the way I imagined. I'm worried that I don't have a central argument to my PhD yet, or a plan about what to research and where, and that this is partly in my control, but largely due to the situation making it very difficult to plan.

At the same time, I feel happy in the things I've achieved so far in the PhD process, and more confident and trusting in my abilities as a researcher. These are some of the things I feel proud of:

- Two years of teaching experience, excellent student feedback, almost completed qualification
- Well-known in my field and good network
- Some friends
- A discipline of writing
- An understanding of the field
- An ethos and approach to knowledge that grounds my research
- A knack for curating panels and conversations between academics
- I'm a good critical reader and editor of other people's work

When I read back over the last couple of instalments of this diary it doesn't seem like a lot has changed, except maybe that I thought that by April 2021 I would be able to travel for field work again, and in practice this hasn't been possible, or I haven't made the choices to change my research project to make it possible. In a lot of ways the lack of change feels apt for a year that has been repetitive, moving slowly but over before it feels like I have anything to show for it. I say to myself: I'm a good thinker, I'm learning how to write. Once I've written, I will have something to show. And that's all I can do.



## **Episode 14**

### **November 2021, PhD year 4 (of 4.5)**

It's November 2021 and I'm a couple of months into the fourth year of what will be a four-and-a-half-year PhD.

I'm now due to submit my PhD in March 2023 (Four and a half years in total). I've applied for another extension until June 2023 but haven't heard back yet about whether that is possible. I'm lucky that my university offered a fourth funded year, and because of Covid-19 there have been some additional funding extensions available, so I'm funded up until my submission date.

The things that have changed in the six months since the last diary entry have been sudden clarity about my PhD topic, and an overall sense of having changed as a person in the past three years since the PhD began...

### **Highs and lows**

The PhD has lots of highs and lows. Yesterday was a low, and today is a high. I've left both parts in deliberately because things feel different from one day to another, and it's helpful to see that sometimes.

### **Lows (22/11/2021)**

#### **Money, time, and changing priorities**

A lot of things have changed with the content of my PhD and the practicalities, and I feel like I've entered a new phase of the project, and of my life. In a practical sense, I'm not teaching or working as an editor anymore, so that I can focus 100% on my research. I've also adapted the research plan to involve less fieldwork, or maybe none at all, which I'll go into more below.

In terms of money and funding, now that I'm not doing paid teaching or editing work, my only source of income is the PhD stipend, and that isn't enough to live on in the way that I want to. I have some savings from when I was working in the civil service before starting the PhD, and I'm using these to top up my monthly stipend, but they will run out before I finish the PhD.

I'm realising I will need to take on additional paid work. This is frustrating because I want to focus full-time on the PhD, but I think it's the best option available to me. At the end of the day I made my choices and I do feel lucky to be able to do what I do. In the short-term I'm planning to find some part-time tutoring work, that will hopefully be well-paid and not as time demanding as teaching in the university.

By choosing to undertake a PhD I've had the amazing opportunity to focus for years on a research project that I would never normally be able to do. But that has come at the cost of earning money, and all the forms of stability that go hand in hand with having a stable income.

The longer the PhD continues, the more my friends start buying places and having mortgages. Over the past three years their incomes have grown, and it gets harder for me seeing that gap widen. It has a practical impact on my friendships because I can't afford to go out to eat, go to bars or on holidays in the same ways that they do, or that I used to. It makes me feel a bit left behind. I hope that after the PhD I will get a decently paid academic job, and that I just need to find a short-term solution till then.

I've gotten older since I started the PhD three years ago, and the things that are important to me have changed as well. I've never done anything for three whole years before since my undergraduate degree. After that I spent a couple of years teaching English, then a couple of years working in Human Rights, then a year on the Masters degree, and then a couple of years in the Civil Service. So, this is the longest I've stayed in one job, and it's starting to feel like forever... I don't feel like the same person I was as when I started.

When I started the PhD the most important things to me were being able to pursue my curiosity and critical thinking. The main thing I wanted out of my job was being critically engaged and intellectually challenged. It was also important to me to travel, and I was excited about being able to undertake field work, studying abroad, and learning another language. I don't know if it was turning thirty, or my break-up last year, or the pandemic, but the things I value from the PhD and from life have changed a lot.

What I value about the PhD has been surprising to me. Some of the most rewarding things have been the teaching and the social element with other PhD students. I realised how important it is to me to be working and thinking with other people, and how little of that is to do with constant critical engagement and thinking. At the same time, because of the pandemic I wasn't able to carry out field work when I planned to. Even now that it's possible again in theory, I just don't want to. The idea of spending three to six months in a place I don't know is not appealing to me anymore. I don't have the same call to adventure that I had before, or that motivates some of my colleagues. I'm much more interested in stability and routine. I've adapted my PhD topic to reflect this.

Equally, the compromises involved in an academic career seem much bigger to me now than they were before. I want to be in a position to buy my own house and live in it, and academia doesn't offer the same opportunities for those as other careers. Because early academic positions often involve moving between cities to follow the jobs, and, because they don't pay well compared to other sectors, I am not sure if it will be the right career for me.

It's not just about the financial stability either. I also appreciate the stability of relationships and being able to build meaningful friendships that don't involve relocating every few years. I sometimes think that the careers I was interested in when I was growing up always involved traveling: pilot, diplomat, development worker. I thought that an academic career was different, but recently it seems like another variation on the same theme.

It's been nice to notice that what I want in life and what I enjoy in the PhD is not what I expected three years or even a year ago. I know that I want to finish the PhD, but I don't know what I want to do after that.

### Highs 23/11/2021

Yesterday I felt low about the PhD, like it was dragging on forever, and like it will never give me the things in life particularly stability. Today I cycled to campus in the autumn leaves and felt a contentment with my life, and a kind of balance between the things I used to want in life and the things I want now.

For example, travel. Yesterday I thought I wasn't interested in travel anymore, but that's not true. For the first time since the pandemic international conferences are happening again and I'm excited to have international trips in my calendar in March and September already. I've also been looking into options to do archival visits and shorter research trips. Just because I don't want to spend months at a time away from home, it doesn't mean I'm not excited about being able to do so every now and then.

If I'm honest, as much as I like working with other people, I am not the best team-player in the world. When I play football, I am a great team player. And I am good at leading activities which is useful when I am teaching. But I get easily frustrated working with other people, and I'm not good at communicating or being patient. I've never been the gel that helps a team move smoothly or the person that remembers everyone's birthday. It's not a coincidence that I've chosen a job – doing a phd - that actually doesn't depend that much on working with other people. And that's okay, I think. I love working with other people, and maybe in this job I get to do just enough of it that it doesn't drive me crazy, and I don't drive other people crazy with my overly critical approach.

Actually, the PhD is the one area in my life I've had stability over the past 12-15 months. It hasn't given me the financial stability that I would like, but it's been consistent and unchanging despite the global pandemic, the break-up that I had, and issues with moving house several times. It's ironic that I've blamed the PhD for taking away my stability, when it's been the one continuous thread that I've followed recently. And recently it's started to give back some of the effort I was putting in.

A couple of months ago I was at a loose end with the project. I kept presenting papers and getting nowhere, getting bogged down in theory, and getting more and more confused about what I was researching. It didn't help that the plan I had made to carry out ethnographically informed research had not been possible because of the pandemic, so I was looking for a new route for the project. I had a really good meeting with my supervisor in September who picked out one paragraph in a paper I sent him and said: 'that is the interesting bit'. It's true that it was the part I was most interested in, but I had cut it from the paper several times because it felt like a tangent to the argument I was making! It felt like a footnote to the project.

Once I focused on the paragraph I was interested in I wrote a new (draft) paper expanding on it. It was so easy to write because it felt like it made sense to me and I was interested in it. This pivoted the focus of my

research project, and suddenly the whole thing has a structure and a route, and I can picture how the complete PhD will look. It felt like the moment came out of the blue, but it was actually tying together a lot of strings that had been flying about for the past few years. It was the result of a lot of intangible work. Now, I have to carry out the research and write the PhD, but the skeleton of it seems to have built itself while I slept.

Maybe I haven't changed as much as I thought I had, and maybe the PhD can give me things I didn't initially expect of it. It can give me stability. It can give me a way to be critical without frustrating other people. It can give me a creative process. It can give me the choice to travel or stay in the library all day. And it can also give me the chance to work with other people. What it won't do is make me rich, but who expected that?

I will write more next time about the research process, my plan for carrying out the next stage of the research, and the campus opening again after lockdown.

### **Concrete outputs**

Since I've started the PhD, I've written the following things:

- \* two chapters of the PhD - an introduction and an empirical chapter
- \* Four draft papers:
  - one empirical paper based on the empirical chapter
  - two theory-based papers
  - my most recent paper based on the new focus of the PhD, which will constitute a historical chapter in the thesis
- \* I've given seven conference presentations based on versions of these papers
- \* I've also presented them at four or five workshops
- \* I've also written various versions of summaries and chapterisations of the thesis

Of this work only some of it will go into my final PhD. Of the two chapters I wrote for the upgrade panel, the empirical chapter based on my early field work will go into the final PhD. I will re-write the introduction entirely. Of the papers I've written the most recent paper will be re-written to be a chapter of my thesis.

I am not sure whether the two theory-based papers will have a place as independent chapters in the final thesis, but they will inform the literature review and theoretical and methodological approach that I outline in the introduction. One of the papers might form a contribution to a collective article that I'm discussing with colleagues, but I have put that off until autumn 2022 so that I can focus on my own research for now.

### **Next steps.**

This is the planned chapterisation of my thesis.

- 1) Introduction (*part written- will redraft*)
- 2) Chapter One: historical background (*writing now*)
- 3) Chapter Two: empirical (*researched & written- will redraft*)
- 4) Chapter Three: empirical (*not written*)
- 5) Chapter Four (*not written*)
- 6) (possible: Chapter Five (*not written*))
- 7) Conclusions (*not written*)

My focus now is writing a paper that will also be Chapter One of my thesis. I will be submitting this for publication. I'm also presenting this paper at two workshops and a conference in February and March 2022. So the absolute latest I will submit it to a journal is April 2022 once I've made the edits based on feedback. If I finish it before then and submit it earlier, I'm not sure if I can still present it at the workshops while it's under consideration so I will check this with my supervisor.

**Episode 15 – On next page**



**Episode 15**  
**October 2022**  
**Beginning of year 5 of 5**

Apologies for the long silence, 11 months... I'm writing this in autumn in the USA, where I am visiting a small liberal arts college for three months. This came about because I asked a faculty member whom I knew through conferences and workshops if I could visit and they organised an institutional invitation for me. I applied to a separate organisation for a grant to cover the travel costs.

I now have an extension to my PhD submission until June or September (next year, so I'm in the final 9-12 month run of a total of 5 years). It's not clear if it's June or September at the moment because it is still being confirmed by the administrators. This is an atypical PhD for the UK because it is 4 to 5 years long, but I have been very lucky with funding extensions on the one hand, and unlucky with the pandemic on the other.

Reflecting on the PhD, I've done so much other than write my thesis. Teaching, editing, presenting at conferences, convening workshops and working groups, participating in collaborative writing, now visiting another university. It's been a very rich and varied experience. Now I need to prioritise and focus on writing. Someone told me that over-work can be a way of avoiding the work you don't want to do - for me I think that is true. I've been avoiding writing my thesis and a paper by filling my time with a lot of other worthwhile activities.

That said, around January 2022 my thesis came together into a coherent shape and I now have a clear central idea and a range of empirical evidence. I will write more in another entry about how I overcame a writing block in March 2022. I now work on my thesis almost every day.

Before I focus 100% on my thesis my priority is to get an article in the process of publication. This is to have a solo authored article on my cv when I start applying for jobs for after the PhD. After the PhD I want to stay in academia, but it is normal for jobs to have 100-200 applicants. Without a solo authored article, I will not be a competitive applicant. For some reason, even though I've been working on this article for over a year, I cannot get it into shape to submit it. It's very frustrating.

Another big recent change is that my supervisor has moved to another institution. I knew this was a possibility from early on in my PhD because we talked about it. Day to day it will not have a lot of impact on me because he is still supervising my project and we often meet on zoom rather than face to face anyway. I don't have another supervisor in my department, but I don't think I need one. My institution has not appointed a replacement or second supervisor. My supervisor is transitioning out of the university and is still formally my supervisor at my university - it's complicated but it means they are not there but they are still my supervisor.

Despite that, I will miss him and miss seeing him in person sometimes. I'm happy that he has another job that is better for him, but I will miss seeing him at meetings or having dinner with him and other PhDs and faculty.

The timing aligns with me visiting the liberal arts college in America. I applied to undertake this fellowship because I wanted a change of scene to help me focus on writing. I thought that being outside of my usual environment, in a quiet college campus, would be a peaceful place to write in without distractions. I know some of the faculty here from summer schools and workshops and I always feel I learn a lot from them. I was also thinking about applying for jobs in the US after my PhD, so I wanted to test the waters.

I'm almost one month into the visit and it aligns with my expectations to an extent. It hasn't helped my focus on my writing, yet, because relocating was disorienting for me and entailed a lot of admin to find a place to live and sublet my room in London, organise travel etc. And settle into a new routine. On the other hand, I do feel I'm learning a lot about how another university works, and especially from observing teaching here. There is an open and conversational approach which is refreshing compared to a more instrumental and rigid approach that I've seen in my university. The environment is very different too as this is a campus university, and my regular university is in a city. Many of the faculty here have lived and worked here for decades. It reminds me of a monastery and feels like a place where people's lives are dedicated to teaching and learning. It's wonderful to visit but I also wonder if I could live like this, so engrossed in the world of academic learning.

The other reason I wanted to visit was to explore my experience of living temporarily in another place. Looking at my friends who've finished their PhDs, many of them apply for jobs all over the world. It's not unusual to see people relocate every 1-2 years until they get a permanent position. I love living in my home city, near to my friends and family, so I don't know if this is a choice I would make. I also want to have a family of my own in the next few years, and although I'm not in a relationship now, I don't think that relocating every few years will be a good way to build a stable life. I haven't come to any conclusions on being here yet. It's true that it's disorienting relocating, but it does feel like a place I could eventually settle into. Being away makes me realise a lot of things I appreciate about where I live now, and I think I would prioritise looking for a job there.

Since the last time I updated the environment at my home university has changed a lot. I have a good group of friends on the PhD who I was seeing every week. We work together and also got drinks. It's amazing knowing there are other people in the same boat as me and having an active office to go to. What a change from the pandemic period. That was a very isolating and challenging time to be working on a PhD.

Another thing that has changed is that I've collected empirical materials from archives and have gathered most of the material I need to write up my PhD.

So, my timeline for the next few months is from now to December be in the USA and focus on submitting an article for publication. From January start applying for jobs to start in September. And January to June/September, write up the PhD. The exact submission date will partly depend on the job market. Some jobs require you to have had your viva and result before start date, others just that you have submitted PhD. I'm not sure how it will play out for me.

**Episode 16 – On next page**

## Episode 16

September 2023

### Finishing the PhD

I submitted my thesis two and a half weeks ago and started a one-year fellowship. My viva is to be held in a month and a half- i.e. mid-November.

I feel very proud of myself and lucky to be surrounded by friends who have been so supportive throughout the PhD, and who I've celebrated submitting with. At the same time, I feel exhausted from the pressure of the final months, and a little lost.

Since submitting the thesis I've felt disoriented, and I have a lot of questions: What was the point of the PhD? What do I want to do with my life now? What was my motivation for writing the thesis? Do I still want the same things that I wanted, five years ago, when I started the PhD, or even seven years ago, when I started the masters programme that led me to the PhD. So much has changed in my life, and I've been through so many cycles of wanting different things throughout the past five years that it's hard to know where I stand now. Equally, the UK and UK academia has changed in the past five years. With the cost-of-living crisis, the UCU strikes and university manager's punitive reaction to the marking boycott this summer (2023), the UK in general, and UK academia specifically, are less hopeful and exciting places to be than they were just a few years ago.

As someone who struggles with ambiguity, a part of me is rushing and pressuring myself into making a new set of life choices, but the advice I keep getting from friends and people who've completed their I already is: pause, rest, reflect, take stock, celebrate the huge achievement of writing a thesis.

I am also very lucky to have a twelve-month contract on a fellowship with a fairly light teaching load, which covers my living costs and gives me a year to work out whatever I want to do next. It is unusual that I was able to get this fellowship without a publication, but it is an opportunity designed for early career researchers, similar to a 'pre-doc' in the US, to support with the transition from a PhD to a post-doc or similar. This was a huge relief for me and meant that I was able to spend the last months of my PhD focused on writing, and not on applying for more jobs.

I'm not sure where to begin with this entry, so I think I will describe the final months of the thesis, the two weeks after submitting, and then reflect on the next steps and beginning this fellowship.

## Final months of the thesis

After returning from a visiting fellowship in the US in January 2023, I had nine months until my submission deadline in September 2023.

Because I have had a tendency throughout the PhD to take on work other than writing (including teaching, editing, going to conferences, convening groups etc.) in February I started tracking my time using an app. This is because I decided to keep teaching for extra income up until the date of submitting my thesis, and I wanted to keep myself accountable for spending most of my time on writing.

Based on those records, I can summarize roughly the split of my time in the last eight months of the thesis. In February, the majority of my time was spent on the journal article, shortly followed by teaching, and in relation to the PhD I revised a summary and chapterisation of the thesis with the intention to send this to potential examiners. In March this split of time was roughly the same. In April, most of my time was spent on the journal article, followed by a roughly even split between the thesis, teaching, and job applications. In May, most of my time was on the journal article, followed by another article for a forum (which became a different chapter of my thesis). In June, I submitted the journal article. In June and July, the great majority of my time was on the thesis. I went to a workshop in July where I workshopped a chapter of the thesis- this took much more time than I had anticipated (including travel and networking time). In August and September, the majority of my time was on the thesis. I attended one conference in September, just before submitting. I will go into this more in a moment.

In summary, from February to June, I focused almost entirely on submitting an article to a peer-reviewed journal. The article is based on the core argument of my thesis, so working on the article helped me to refine the core argument. I submitted the article in June, and from June to September almost all of my time was spent on the thesis. This meant that I wrote much of the thesis in the final three months before submission. When I saw friends who had already completed their PhDs in July, and they heard that I was still writing chapters for my thesis, some of them were shocked, and others told me that they had worked in a similar way.

I don't know if I would do this the same way again if I had a choice. For one thing, the last two to three months of the PhD were very stressful. I would say that my stress peaked around June or July, when I did not have a complete draft in front of me, and I did not know if I would be able to write a complete thesis. By the end of July, I had a clear map of every chapter and how it fitted together, and even though I was working longer and longer hours, my worries declined from there to the end of the PhD as I had more words on paper.



## Writing the final version

I will describe the way I wrote the thesis. It's important to note that every time I completed a draft chapter, I sent it to a friend or colleague for feedback. Most of the chapters had two rounds of feedback before the final iteration. This meant that the chapters were going back and forward with people while I was writing other ones. Roughly in June, I made a list of all the people I could ask for help with reading and editing, contacted them, and mapped out who had capacity to help and interest in each chapter.

One other thing that is worth noting is that my PhD project was completely transformed at the end of the second year of my PhD, because the pandemic meant I could not do the field work that I had planned. This meant that I used almost none of the writing I'd done in the first one to two years of the PhD in the final draft. One of the hardest parts of this process was deciding what not to include in the final thesis.

In terms of writing, I first drafted the introduction. Then I wrote chapters 2-4, these were based on the journal article, and I wrote these fairly quickly based on empirical materials that did not fit into the article. Then I wrote chapters 5 and 6. One of these took about a month as it required engagement with additional literature. The other one was based on the forum contribution I mentioned earlier, and had been workshopped twice during the year, so was very quick to turn into a chapter. This meant that I still had the introduction, conclusion, theory chapter, and one substantive chapter left to write. The theory chapter (chapter 1) I had already drafted earlier in the PhD, but when I returned to this it still was one of the hardest and most time-consuming chapters to write. I considered not writing the final substantive chapter (chapter 7) although I had already collected the empirics and could see the argument. In agreement with my supervisor, I gave myself a week to write it, and decided that if it didn't come together in that time, I would leave it. It was the easiest chapter to write and brought together a lot of themes in the thesis, so I was happy that I wrote it. Then I had roughly a week to re-draft the introduction and write the conclusion. When I wrote the conclusion the first time it did not work at all, so I had to bin it. I went back and edited the thesis, then returned to the conclusion again a week later, and wrote it in two days. Then I had a week to finalise the references and copy-edit the thesis before submission.

Although the writing was stressful, I absolutely loved it some of the time. After struggling with the motivation to write for years, I felt like suddenly a lot of ideas I'd been working on were articulating themselves, not effortlessly, but fluently, and it was wonderful to have such a creative period.

I was very lucky to have incredibly supportive friends and mentors who met with me and gave me feedback throughout the PhD, and especially in the last months. I can't repay the debts or express my gratitude to them.

I will also say, that while I wouldn't make the choice to attend a conference just before a major deadline again, this was also very helpful for me to talk and think through ideas that I was presenting. I could incorporate the feedback from the conference into the thesis editing, even just days before submitting, and

this helped me anticipate how people might read the thesis. Again- I don't know if this will have paid off, as I have not yet had my viva.

## **Supervisor**

One thing I learnt in the final months of the thesis is that there are huge differences between different supervisor's styles to supervision in the final months. I have seen some of my friends get track-changes style edits from their supervisor. This was not my supervisor's style of feedback at any point in the PhD, and they tend to give me two to three big picture comments on the work. Towards the end of the thesis, I found that I wanted more granular feedback, but this was not something that my supervisor thought would be helpful. There were also a few months when they were less communicative than usual, partly due to moving to another institution. As I was feeling anxious about completing the PhD, I wanted more hands-on supervision and more direct involvement from my supervisor in the project. At the same time, I understood their perspective that at this stage the thesis was out of their hands, and even if they gave me more detailed or substantive feedback, I wouldn't have had time to integrate it. On one hand, I would have liked more support. On the other hand, I feel a sense of ownership over my project that I don't know if I would have, had they been more involved in edits.

In a similar way, I asked my supervisor if they would sit in on my viva in November, and their preference is not to, because they think that distracts from the engagement between me and the examiners. I understand this and appreciate being treated as a scholar and a peer, but I would also have preferred to have the supportive presence of my supervisor in the room or online.

## **Handing in**

The final days and weeks before hand-in were intense. I started working seven-day weeks and by the end, 12-hour days. I stopped doing all my hobbies, and to be honest probably neglected myself and exhausted myself. At the same time, a part of me enjoyed this intensity of focus, and the clear prioritisation it gave me in my life. Coming towards the end of this period, I reflected on my general tendency to over-work myself, and the way that this might distract me from thinking about what makes me happy in my life. As one of many life-long over-achievers in academia, I started to question my life choices, and just wanted to go swimming, sleep-in etc. Especially as I was at a conference a few days before submitting, I realised that I've been chronically over-committing myself, and not leaving myself time or space to relax or sit quietly.

I felt very proud of what I finally handed in. The document had a coherence that I hadn't been sure it would. It's not perfect, and I was proud of myself for not letting perfectionism keep me back from submitting it. It may need major or minor corrections. It also fit together in ways I hadn't anticipated, and there were parts of it that worked better than I had thought they might.

## **Celebrating**

A few months before submitting the thesis I started to feel exhausted at the prospect of handing in the thesis and then starting to work immediately. A friend and mentor suggested I book a holiday. I booked a one-week holiday and having this to look forward to motivated me to finish the thesis. When I went on the holiday, I was so exhausted, and anxiety ridden that I was still waking up every day proof-reading the thesis in my head. Having a week to unwind made a huge difference.

## **What next?**

While I initially felt proud of myself for finishing the thesis, after a few days, I felt totally lost. I was hit by the feeling of having spent five years on something that might not mean very much to anyone apart from me. I don't know what I want in my life. I felt lucky to have a job, but with no motivation to do it. I had arranged to host an event to celebrate with friends. By the day of the event, I didn't feel like celebrating at all. But it was so nice to see friends who congratulated me that it made me see what an achievement submitting the thesis is. Like running a marathon. It was something to feel proud of in and of itself. I also spoke with friends who had submitted their PhDs before, who mostly had had very similar feelings, which made me feel like my experience was part of a shared experience.

I'll next provide an instalment in what next and preparing for the viva. Briefly, my journal article was rejected after R and R, which has been a set-back and means I'm still not a competitive job candidate. My priorities now are editing and submitting the article again and applying for postdocs. I also want to find time to rest and give myself the space to think about whether pursuing an academic career is right for me now at all.

## Episode 17

### The viva

#### 1 Preparations

I had two months between submitting my thesis and my viva in which to prepare for the viva. After taking a week off to rest after submitting my thesis, I started a new job. So that meant I had to juggle teaching responsibilities with preparing for the viva. To prepare, I met with my supervisor, another mentor, and a friend who had recently had their viva. The advice that they gave me was helpful, but sometimes contradictory.

Some advice that I found helpful was to identify my key arguments and contributions that I would defend and not concede ground on, and to be prepared to make concessions on everything outside of that. My supervisor advised not to have a practice viva (unless I could persuade someone to read the whole project), but a friend told me that this had been helpful for them, and so I decided to do it.

Another question I had was whether there were codes or things to look out for in the viva that would indicate whether it was going well or not. I was told that if you get to a point in the conversation that it is more focused on 'the book' than the thesis then that is a good sign, and a definite pass. Equally, some examiners will tell you up front at the beginning of the conversation what the outcome is, whereas others will have a more or less formal style and see the viva as a rite of passage to defend the work. Before the viva a couple of people told me they had heard that one of my examiners had a reputation for being a tough examiner. I was happy to have the heads up but nervous about that.

The week before the viva I read through the thesis again and made notes on the questions that I thought might come up, based on the work. I googled common viva questions and also asked friends who had compiled lists of questions they'd been asked in their viva. I met with a friend to have a practice viva. This was really helpful, as they asked me general questions about theory and method that did come up in the viva, and I found it helpful to have talked them through before them.

I felt so nervous about the viva that I wanted to cancel it. I was exhausted from submitting the thesis and then starting a new job immediately. I felt down and confused about what I wanted next in life. I was afraid that I would be so overwhelmed by the viva experience that I would either fail to defend my project at all, break down and cry, or be really aggressive with the examiners and potentially damage some relationships. I was also nervous about what to expect from the day in terms of getting a meal afterwards or inviting friends to be there. I had asked a mentor in my department to chair the viva, as my supervisor would not be there.

I spoke with some friends who had had very positive viva experiences, who said it was wonderful to be able to talk with experts about your project, and that you might never have had the opportunity to have a conversation with serious scholars who had really engaged with your work.

## 2 The Day

I didn't sleep well the night before the viva and then lost track of time in the morning. I was grateful that I'd asked a friend to meet me before the viva, because he gave me a sandwich on my way in, which I needed, as the whole conversation ended up being almost four hours. I didn't enjoy it and felt disappointed that it wasn't more like what I had hoped for. But the positive outcome was that I passed with minor corrections and engaged in a serious conversation about the project.

I was disappointed because I had been excited about talking through a lot of ideas that I'd been thinking about for years and having an engaged conversation about them. In the event the questions were much more oriented towards questions of structure, methodology, and theoretical framework, rather than what I felt was the substantive intervention of my thesis. In fact, the corrections that the examiners requested were mostly related to questions of structure, method, and engagement with existing literature. I found this really frustrating, because I wanted to know what they thought about the ideas in the project. They said that all the empirical content and contribution was clear. Reflecting on this, I think the examiners are right that a clearer outline of the structure and theoretical framework would have been helpful. As my project had been quite scappily put together at the last minute it made it harder for a reader to engage with it substantively. At the viva, I reflected that they had raised some questions which I did not understand and did not feel corresponded to the content of the project. Reading the examiners' reports later, I realised that we had some misunderstandings about the aims, arguments, and nature of the project. So, at times the viva conversation had been at cross-purposes. Because of this, some of the corrections that were requested did not reflect my aims or the project. Reflecting on this now, it has been helpful for me to articulate the project more clearly, but at the time it felt very frustrating, and I felt like the examiners hadn't understood the project and were asking me to do something quite different.

The conversation was challenging (sometimes in a good way) and I had to be totally switched on, and at times firmly defend the core elements of the thesis. I was happy that I was able to do this without being overly aggressive or submissive, and, out of everything, that felt like my biggest achievement on the day, and something that gives me confidence in myself.

The initial conversation was almost two and a half hours long, then I left the room while the examiners deliberated for twenty minutes. When I went back in, we talked for about an hour about how to implement the corrections. So overall it felt like a marathon! After the viva the chair had brought champagne, and a few colleagues and friends dropped in for a toast. I felt like I was expected to celebrate the achievement of having passed the viva, but inside I felt like crying. The examiner who had a reputation for being challenging told me that it had been a very good viva, I asked what a bad viva looks like, and she said it looks like the candidate crying.

We went on to the pub. But I regret that now, as I just wanted to go home, and was totally disassociated. The mood of celebration did not match how I was feeling.



### 3. After the viva

Afterwards I gathered from friends and colleagues that the length of the viva had been down to a debate between whether to give major or minor corrections. I heard that I had done very well in the viva to give the examiners confidence in my understanding of their questions, and to defend the core arguments. Also, I heard that most of what the examiners had been asking for were things they would have expected my supervisor to have asked for (theory, method, structure etc.). That made me see that a part of the dynamic was the challenge posed by my supervisor leaving the department in the last year of my PhD. There was an implication that he should have asked me to include the missing architecture of the thesis. But in a way I am glad that he didn't because I found that very 'disciplining'. I preferred to be given the creative freedom to write my thesis how I wanted. Sometimes it's necessary to clarify genre to be legible to other people, but I think that is always a balance with having integrity with your work. I'm not sure how I feel about it, still ambivalent.

When I met my supervisor a few weeks after the viva, I felt very relieved and reassured by the conversation. The reason was that it affirmed to me that he had understood what I was trying to do in the project. I felt very appreciative that he had engaged with the ideas throughout the project, and that he had a good sense of what I was doing, especially the bits that hadn't come through to the examiners. This was very affirming.

The corrections were called 'minor'. So, they now only need to be read by the internal examiner and there will not be another panel. But in practice the corrections are in a grey area between minor and major corrections, with some fairly substantive edits to be made. After the viva, I went through the corrections and identified the ones I felt comfortable with completing, and the ones that I don't feel reflect my project. I met the internal examiner to talk through my thoughts about the corrections, and we agreed on which corrections I would implement, and which I would not implement, but would include a section in the introduction outlining the logic so that a reader could follow why I had made those choices. This was a process of negotiation. I agreed to some changes that I wasn't completely happy with, but, on the whole, I am happy that I did not agree to the changes that I felt I couldn't live with. I also knew it was important to do what the examiners said.

Even though I had anticipated that it was likely I would have corrections on the thesis, I have found the process of making amendments very frustrating. This is because I also have teaching commitments, I am on the job market so I'm applying for jobs, and I still haven't published an academic article. I would like to be focusing on writing for publication, rather than continuing to work on the PhD thesis. I delayed starting the corrections for weeks after the viva because I was really still not happy about making them.

At the same time, now that I am focusing on the corrections as the deadline approaches, it is useful and interesting. Articulating the theory and method is helpful for me to think through the coherence of the project and the framework, and even though it's not what I want to be focusing on now, I think it will make it a better project, and probably help me turn the thesis into a book manuscript in the next few years. At the same time, most of the work I

am adding relating to theory and method will be cut from a book manuscript. So, I'm not sure what to think about writing sections that will be removed again before anyone reads them.

#### **4. Reflections on my experience of being examined for a doctorate**

A big part of the writing process is editing, and for me, I am doing the major edit as part of the corrections process. If you have the discipline to write and edit before the submission deadline, then I think that would be better. If not, then I would factor in that unless you are extremely lucky, there will be a post-submission editing period. Which is outside of your PhD funding period, and probably carried out at the same time as you have other responsibilities and priorities.

I am not sure if I would have included more theoretical and methodological scaffolding if I was doing this again. It seems like 90% of examiners will ask for this. So, for strategic reasons, it might be worth doing this, or preparing a good defence of why you haven't done it (which is probably just as much work but might have more integrity).

Because I'm working in a fairly small field, there was an obvious choice of external examiner, and I started having conversations with them with that in mind about a year or two into the PhD. Retrospectively, I later heard from others that they were a challenging examiner who often asked for substantive corrections and where the viva can run to many hours. By the time I heard that, I felt it would be too late to change my choice, but I would recommend keeping options open for examiners until you've been able to scope them out if possible.

I had a lot of fantasies about the viva being a process of welcoming into a scholarly community and being treated as a peer. My experience of the viva resembled more a student-teacher relationship, in the sense that I felt my project was being assessed according to a regular mark scheme relating to clarity, coherence, methods section etc., in the way I would grade an undergraduate or graduate dissertation, and not the way I would review a colleague's book. At the end of the day, it is an 'exam', and if I had anticipated that I might have found it less disappointing. I also had not checked the criteria that examiners were instructed to apply.

I would recommend not feeling like you have to get drinks after your viva unless you feel like it at the time. The pressure in the moment was fairly strong as people wanted to celebrate me. I don't know what I could have done differently, but retrospectively I realise I was exhausted (too exhausted to leave), and maybe having a friend on hand to decline the drinks and take me home would have been a better plan.

Now, a few months on, I've settled back into a rhythm, and I feel like I have more patience with not just the PhD but also the publication process and job process. Seeing friends in similar positions, some people are lucky to submit their thesis with publications already in hand, and no corrections, and go on to quickly get a permanent role or prestigious postdoc. Others spend years in precarious employment to reach the same position. My experience has been that everything takes longer than I anticipate or want, whether that's writing and correcting the thesis, getting an article through the publication process, or getting a job. I am worried about not having an academic job or postdoc yet for this September (it's April now), but still hopeful that something will come through. At the same time,

with the amendments deadline six weeks away, I'm prioritising routine and writing for a few hours a day every day, which is the only bit in my control, and trying to be more patient with the process than I have been before, and more accepting of my own pace as well as limitations outside my control.