

15 minutes to develop your research career

Podcast Transcript

Episode 6: The unspoken challenges of research life

Claire Doffegnies: This is the [Taylor & Francis](#) and [Vitae](#) podcast on developing your research career. I'm Claire Doffegnies, from Taylor & Francis.

Marie Thouaille: And I'm Marie Thouaille from Vitae.

Claire Doffegnies: In this episode, we're in Birmingham at the Vitae Researcher Development Conference. And we're talking about the unspoken barriers to researchers' careers.

Marie Thouaille: We're interested in drawing out issues of inclusivity, equality, and diversity amongst researchers. So we'll be asking what is the significance of gender in the research landscape?

Alison Mitchell: In certain disciplines, the culture, the language of that discipline, goes against women finding it easy to progress.

Marie Thouaille: What barriers do researchers from ethnic minority backgrounds face when pursuing a career in academia?

Tinu Cornish: They will say quite happily to me, "Oh goodness, yes. I never pick Chinese students to answer questions, because I can't remember their names."

Marie Thouaille: What are the barriers to researchers taking parental leave.

Anna Slater: People say, I chose not to have children until I had a permanent contract. So that's a really profound effect on your entire life.

Marie Thouaille: What support is available and what practical steps can you take to support your colleagues??

Alison Mitchell: All individuals who are working in a diverse environment have responsibilities for each other.

Claire Doffegnies: So settle in for the next 15 minutes as we discuss the unspoken challenges of research life.

Speaker 7: I'm Irish. You can probably hear from the accent. We had just enacted legislation to give fathers, for the first time, paternity leave, but it didn't apply to me. Now that was a loophole in the legislation. It was nothing to do with being in research, but it brought it all home to me that there's an awful lot of discussions happening around these kind of equality and fairness topics and bringing in maternity, paternity, adoptive leave and considerations there. That's fantastic. And it is definitely

at the leading edge of best practices, but all too often, certainly at home in Dublin, the dads are left out of the discussion, or they're an afterthought that's just kind of tacked on.

Speaker 8: I'm from Japan. In Japan, many researchers are male, and I think top of the researchers, almost all members are male. So they decide everything. And many female do not agree with it.

Speaker 9: I don't know what the unspoken challenges are necessarily. Maybe it's because we're quite good at being upfront about our challenges from where we're from. It's very much an open environment, I think in our chemistry building. We're very fortunate to have or used to hold a gold Athena SWAN award in chemistry. We've got a team in chemistry devoted to promoting the diversity amongst our staff and students. And we're quite fortunate to have a near enough 50% gender balance in our undergraduates, that's slightly less in post-graduates, but that's a massive drop by the time you get to an academic position, which we're all trying to fix. As long as we're all aware and talking about it, that can only improve.

Claire Doffegnies: As a researcher yourself, Marie, what comes to mind when I say, what are the unspoken challenges facing researchers?

Marie Thouaille: It's really funny, everybody kind of seizes up when we say that, because we suddenly think, oh, what are the unspoken challenges? And am I allowed to talk about these things? And obviously there is actually a lot of research on a lot of these things that we're qualifying as unspoken challenges.

So actually they're not completely unspoken, but I think of things like gender, things like race, but also there are other ways in which people might not feel they have equal access to career development, or they're not able to develop their career as well as somebody else. And I think a lot of that comes under unconscious bias and it might also be to do with, for example, disability is something that we don't speak a lot about and that people often feel uncomfortable discussing.

Claire Doffegnies: What are some of the things that you want to get out of today?

Marie Thouaille: I'd really like to understand how we can bring these issues to the surface. You know, how can we make some of the unspoken challenges perhaps spoken?

Anna Slater: My name is Anna Slater. I'm a researcher at the [University of Liverpool](#). I've just started my independent research career. Before that I was a post-doc for six years. We've been running a project, looking at the experiences of researchers who take maternity, paternity, adoption and/or parental leave, and looking at the barriers and the best practice that is in that area.

Marie Thouaille: According to your study, what does the landscape of support for research after taking parental leave look like?

Anna Slater: The landscape of support I would say is variable. Some people experience fantastic support before, during and after a period of leave that they take. Some people feel that they've fallen through the cracks and get no support.

Marie Thouaille: Can you tell us a little bit about the barriers that researchers encounter when they are thinking about or taking parental leave?

Anna Slater: The most common reported one was financial issues, followed by job security fears. People were concerned not only about what's going to happen for this contract, but also, how is this going to impact on my research career in the longer term? A lot of people also cited their line manager or PI as a barrier to taking research. And I think we see that both the PI acts as a barrier, but also potentially as a really important source of support.

Marie Thouaille: Research staff are often employed on a series of fixed term contracts. What do you think are the implications of this kind of culture on researcher's experience of taking parental leave?

Anna Slater: So everybody's story is different. So some people find that having a flexible contract works well for them in terms of arranging their childcare, having a period of leave, some people find this very negatively affects their experience. So not knowing what they're entitled to makes a big difference, and not having that certainty may. So, anecdotally, people say I chose not to have children until I had a permanent contract. So that's a really profound effect on your entire life due to this short-term nature of research contracts.

And this also feeds in when you think about the competition to get the next research contract, or to move to a job you want to, in terms of progressing your research career. Some people experience a lot of pressure to generate a lot of outputs, and see a period of leave as a real roadblock to developing their research career. And that's something that I think we really would like to change.

Marie Thouaille: So what do you think institutions can do to better support researchers going on or returning from leave?

Anna Slater:

Some of the things that are coming out as early themes for how an institution might support researchers taking leave would be talking to the researcher early and giving them a list of what they can ask for rather than expecting the researcher to come to you and know what they want. Not everybody knows what they're entitled to. Not everybody knows what the institution offers. Being clear as line manager of somebody going on leave that this is not an impediment to their research career, that you see this as something that they are entitled to, something positive. So my line manager was really excited when I told him I was pregnant. He was more excited than I was, it was a really early stage because I'm a chemist.

So I had to tell them very early, and it was just so refreshing that he was happy. So I think be happy when somebody tells you about their experience. Part of the guidance that we are trying to produce is, where do you find out what you are entitled to in law? And then who might you talk to you in your institution to find out what you're entitled to from your institution? So for example, not everybody is immediately entitled to the university's maternity, paternity pay from the minute they work there. So some people have a period of, they have to work for 12 months, for example, that varies from

institution to institution. So who would you talk to, and what information should institutions provide?

Marie Thouaille: So finally, what would be your top tip for researchers thinking of applying for parental leave?

Anna Slater: So one of the questions in our survey was, what top tip would you give to a researcher going on leave? And they range from the very practical. So learn about the salary sacrifice schemes that you can be part of through your institution, for paying for childcare, or sort out childcare even before your child is born. So that's something that I kind of fell foul of. I didn't know that. And we ended up on a bit of a long waiting list. And one other really nice piece of advice somebody suggested was, pay it forward. So when you are supported, pay that forward and be supportive to others.

Tinu Cornish: My name is Tinu Cornish, and I am senior training and learning advisor at ECU. And my role is to really support the capacity of the sector to deliver around equalities.

Marie Thouaille: What barriers do researchers from ethnic minority backgrounds face when they pursue a career in academia?

Tinu Cornish: I think that it can be summed up in lots and lots and lots of little ways that people are excluded from being part of the in-group, the most popular group, the favored group. Say for example, they're working on fixed term contracts. So when I looked at the people who pass the Race Equality Charter trial, I assumed that one of the figures that we would look at, we look at whether BME researchers are as likely as white researchers to refer to the ref. And I sort of assumed, yeah, they're definitely not going to be, but actually I found the opposite was true. They were more likely to be referred to the ref in a surprising number of the institutions. So what it was indicating to me was that they were on fixed terms contracts doing really high quality research work, but didn't have the personal relationship, which meant that they had a lecturer or a professor who would go that extra mile to get them on the open-ended permanent contract.

So I was carrying out a lot of research for one of the London universities and the Pro-Vice-Chancellor was very candid. And he said, there is a paper-width difference between research fellows and lecturers at these institutions. And it all depends on whether your professor puts you on as first author, whether they encourage you to be on a grant application, whether they ask you to co-present at a prestigious conference, whether they give you the opportunity to supervise the PhD student, who's going to have the most publishable work. All of that is discretionary. And that tends, unfortunately because of unconscious bias, to go to people who we have closer relationships with. And we're more likely to have closer relationships with people who are like us.

Marie Thouaille: You just mentioned unconscious bias. And I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about what researchers should know about unconscious bias.

Tinu Cornish: We often believe that discrimination is something that nasty people are doing, and people who've got nasty values, but I became interested in unconscious bias when I was working

with social workers who are the nicest, kindest, most wonderful people I'd ever met. And still, when you look to all of their headcount statistics, all the issues around BMEs not being represented, women not getting into senior management, all there. And I realized that we have to get that unconscious bias is bias that nice people are doing without being aware of it, despite their firm values and intentions to the opposite, but it is having measurable impacts on people's careers. So we need to stop looking at ourselves and our value. We've got to start looking at our data and our data we'll highlight our bias blind spots.

Alison Mitchell: I'm Alison Mitchell, I'm director of development at [Vitae](#). Intersectionality is a very complex area of social sciences research. But essentially, and if I can simplify it a bit, intersectionality means that an individual, a researcher, may present or have more than one protected characteristic, for example, gender and ethnicity or disability, and therefore their social identity intersects across those characteristics to create a whole in terms of the impact on them that is greater than the different individual components. There are different forms of discrimination. And so for individuals who have multiple protected characteristics, there's potentially an intersection of multiple forms of discrimination as well. So every researcher counts, for example, we have some resources which are called 'don't put me in a box' which look at the assumptions that are made and the oversimplification, if you like, about equality and diversity issues within the research environment.

I think an interesting question is, who ultimately has responsibility for the welfare of researchers? Is it the PI or the supervisor? Is it the university? Is it the careers service? Is it advisor of studies? It's important that PIs challenge their own assumptions and those of others in daily decision-making. Who goes to a conference, who should present a paper, when to hold meetings, how to make advancement decisions. Research is a complex environment, and it's not just PIs who create inclusive environments. All individuals who are working in a diverse environment have responsibilities for each other. Teamwork is crucial. And an inclusive environment is where everyone feels accepted and is able to work to their best. I would really recommend people to have a look at the ['every researcher counts'](#) resources on our website.

Claire Doffegnies: So what have been your main takeaways from today, Marie?

Marie Thouaille: What's really struck me from talking with Alison, Tinu, and Anna is that there's some really simple, practical steps that institutions can take, which can make a real world of difference to researchers. So for example, offering unconscious bias training, or by raising the profile of positive role models from underrepresented groups.

Claire Doffegnies: But there's also some things that researchers can do themselves, right?

Marie Thouaille: Absolutely. I think researchers facing these unspoken barriers could consider seeking support through mentoring or even through peer networking. There's evidence that mentoring can support individuals with their equality and diversity needs, and can really also be transformative in terms of professional and career development. And meanwhile, peer support and in particular, realizing that others are experiencing the same worries and the same stress. And that can be extremely powerful in addressing the isolation that may be caused by equality and diversity issues.

Claire Doffegnies: As we've seen today, researchers face a range of challenges to do with equality and diversity. By breaking taboos and discussing inequalities openly, we can work towards creating a more inclusive research environment in which all researchers can thrive. Thank you for listening. We'll see you here next time.