

# How to find your **academic self** – and keep it **healthy**

**Dimitrios Meletis**

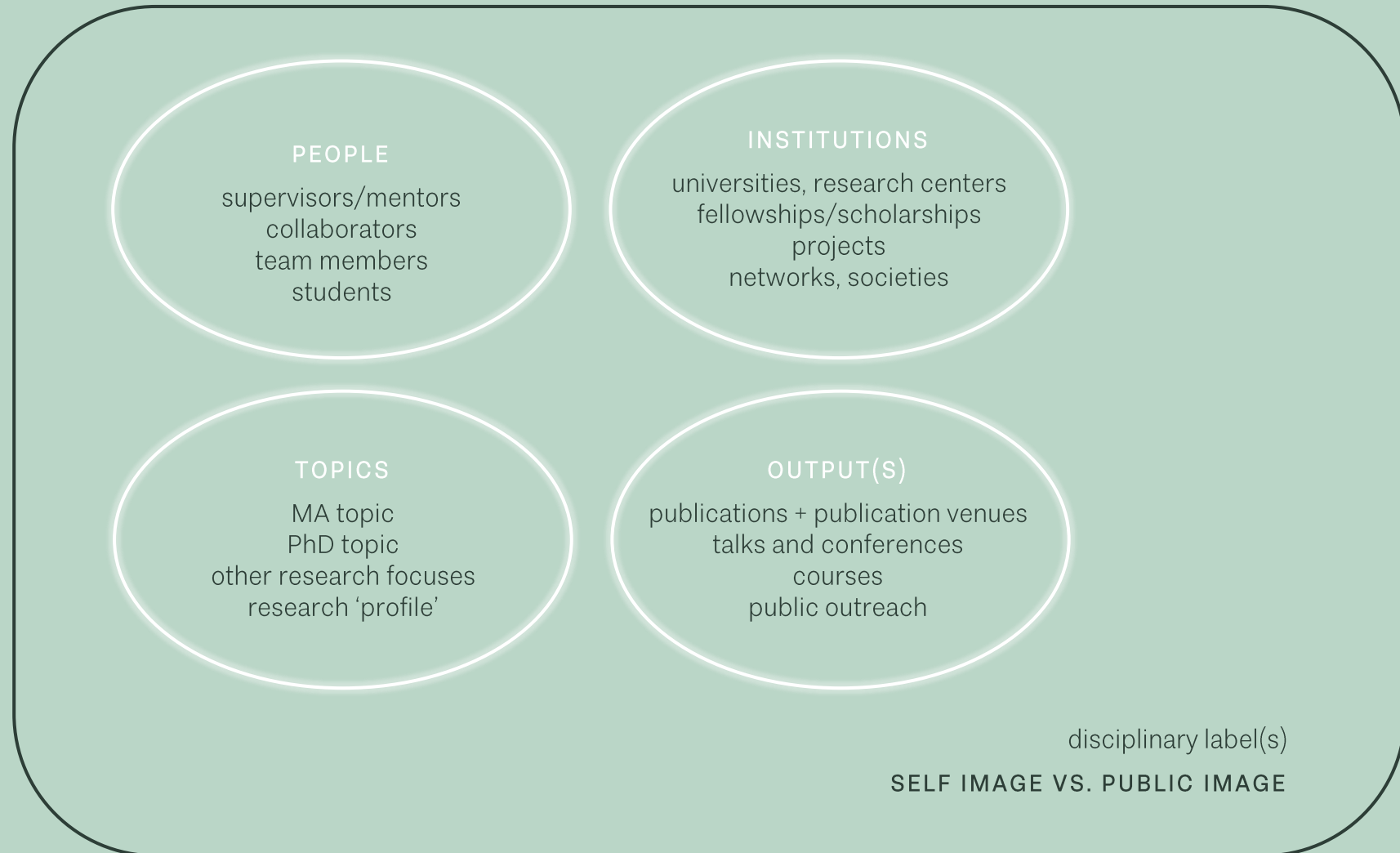
*University of Vienna*

spraWIEN

15.06.2024



# Relevant factors



# Challenging tasks

- > finding a topic/field
- > becoming visible, making your research visible
- > 'selling' yourself to get funding or positions, not falling prey to performativity and an obsession with success/achievement
- > making tough decisions (and/or sacrifices)
- > juggling research and other academic duties
- > juggling academia and your personal life, setting boundaries
- > dealing with competition, self-doubt, impostor syndrome, loneliness, and gatekeeping
- > finding meaning in what you do



Have you struggled  
because of any of  
these issues?

# struggles



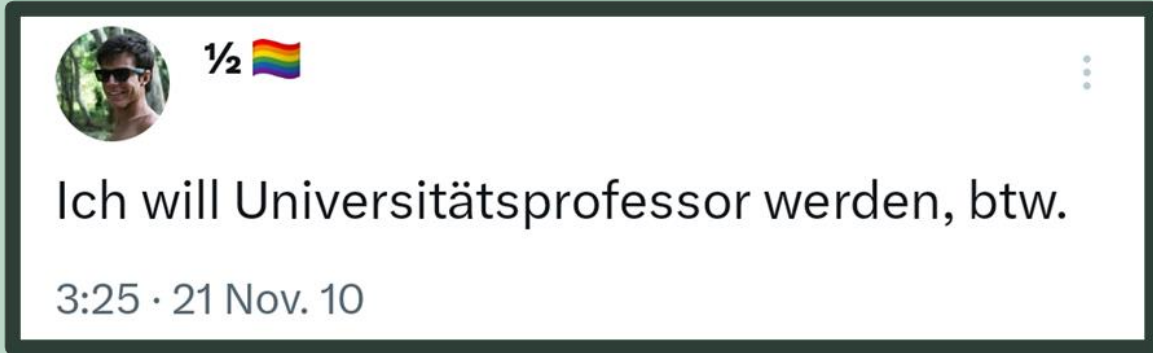
1/2 🏳️‍🌈



Einige Dinge, die besonders belastend sind, sind die Sinnfrage, die Perspektivenlosigkeit, die Selbstinszenierung, die Selbstausbeutung, der Druck & die Konkurrenz. Vieles davon ist in zahlreichen Metiers zentral, aber die spezielle Mischung macht die Wissenschaft gefährlich.

15:40 · 01 Juli 18

# Going into and staying in academia



# Going into and staying in academia



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Ich will Universitätsprofessor werden, btw.

3:25 · 21 Nov. 10



½ 🏳️‍🌈



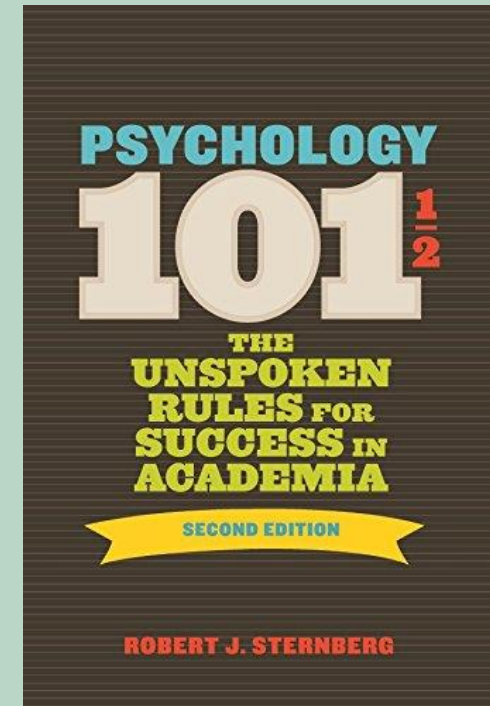
Wenn du einen Traum, den du gefühlt ewig hattest und der jahrelang die Vorstellung deiner Zukunft dominierte, aufgibst & dabei überraschend Erleichterung empfindest, war es vielleicht kein Traum (mehr), sondern die Erwartung von dem, was du zu träumen hast.

12:59 · 20 Juli 20

# Maxims for academia

- > identity and integrity / yourself
- > interpersonal relationships
- > institutions and academia
- > job and career ————— the system

—Robert J. Sternberg (psychologist)





# Battling academic fake selves

## Principle of care

Substitute a politics of competition by an ethics of care (for yourself and for others). Science is about collaborative knowledge and not a massacre.

## Principle of incompleteness

Acknowledge that you have not read everything and that you cannot debate all topics. Learn to say: “I don’t know anything about Derrida. Maybe one day, I will read him, or not”.

## Principle of honesty

Train yourself to say publicly: “I am not researching anything new at the moment, nor writing”. When a colleague asks you “what are you working on?”, learn to say “I don’t know. I am teaching and that already takes a considerable amount of time. I have nothing to publish right now”.

## Principle of irony

Always have a big critical laugh at metrics and other tricks of neoliberal evaluations. They only painfully reopen your narcissistic wounds.

## Principle of self-preservation

Try to avoid – as much as possible – toxic colleagues who never ask you how you are, but only list their own academic achievements and focus on lauding their CV.

—David Berliner (anthropologist)

# Academic identity

## The enterprising academic

The enterprising academic is characterized with the view that an academic ought to go by the book and do whatever it takes to be identifiable, measurable, comparable and viable as declared by the neoliberal norms.

## The ambivalent academic

The ambivalent academic is also described as 'border crossing academic' to imply that they are trapped between their own academic authenticity and the demands of the neoliberal norms in the academy. They are experiencing a mismatch between the espoused and actual values, and thus facing an ambivalence in adapting to the new academy.

## The authentic academic

The authentic academic can be characterized with a form of resistance to becoming a purely performing subject through consciously and conscientiously standing against the dominant ideologies of the neoliberal university. They exercise strong agency for pursuing their own path, and clearly do not define this path in careerist terms.

**Tülübaş, Tijen & Şöheyda Göktürk (2023).** A meta-synthesis on academic identity in the neoliberal context of academy. *Higher Education* 86: 139–161. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00906-9>

# **Yourself:** Identity and integrity

- > Decide what is important to you, and then be true to it.
- > Don't take yourself too seriously.
- > Practice what you preach.
- > Create your own style of work to distinguish yourself from the rest.
- > Compare yourself with yourself rather than with others.
- > Redefine yourself as often as you need to.

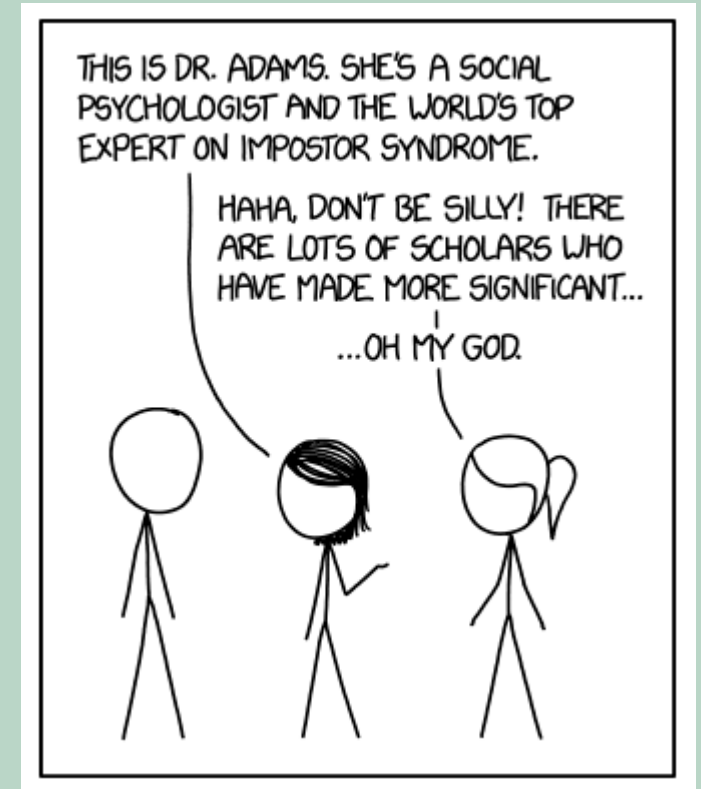


Do you compare  
yourself to others?

# Impostor syndrome

- > learn the facts: address cognitive distortions leading to impostor syndrome
- > share your feelings
- > acknowledge your achievements, celebrate your successes
- > let go of perfectionism
- > cultivate self-compassion
- > share your failures
- > accept it

Abramson, Ashley (2021). How to overcome impostor phenomenon. *Monitor on Psychology* 52(4): 44.  
<https://www.apa.org/monitor/2021/06/cover-impostor-phenomenon>



<https://xkcd.com/1954/>

# Interpersonal **relationships**

- > Don't take things personally.
- > Actively seek out guidance and feedback.
- > Be true to yourself and let others be true to themselves.
- > Don't try to please everyone.
- > Help each person find their own niche.
- > Don't accept someone's views just because they are supposed to be an authority.
- > Look for collaborators with whom the whole is more than the sum of the parts.

# Principle of care



**Troy Heffernan**

@troyheff



Watching someone celebrate their first publication only to have one of the first comments be 'That's not a very good journal' is everything wrong with academia.

You won't be remembered for your citations, intelligence, or wit in academia, you will be remembered for your kindness

8:17 PM · 2024-05-06 From Earth · **606** Views

# Principle of care



Jorge J Rodríguez V  
@JJRodV

The advice I continue giving folks looking into PhD programs is to look for an advisor who is kind.

Don't look for the "most brilliant" advisor. Look for the person who is kind, who mentors you, lifts you up.

And pro-tip: kind folks are usually the most brilliant.

[#PhDChat](#)



# Self-care



Academic Chatter™ 

@AcademicChatter

Academia: "practice self-care"

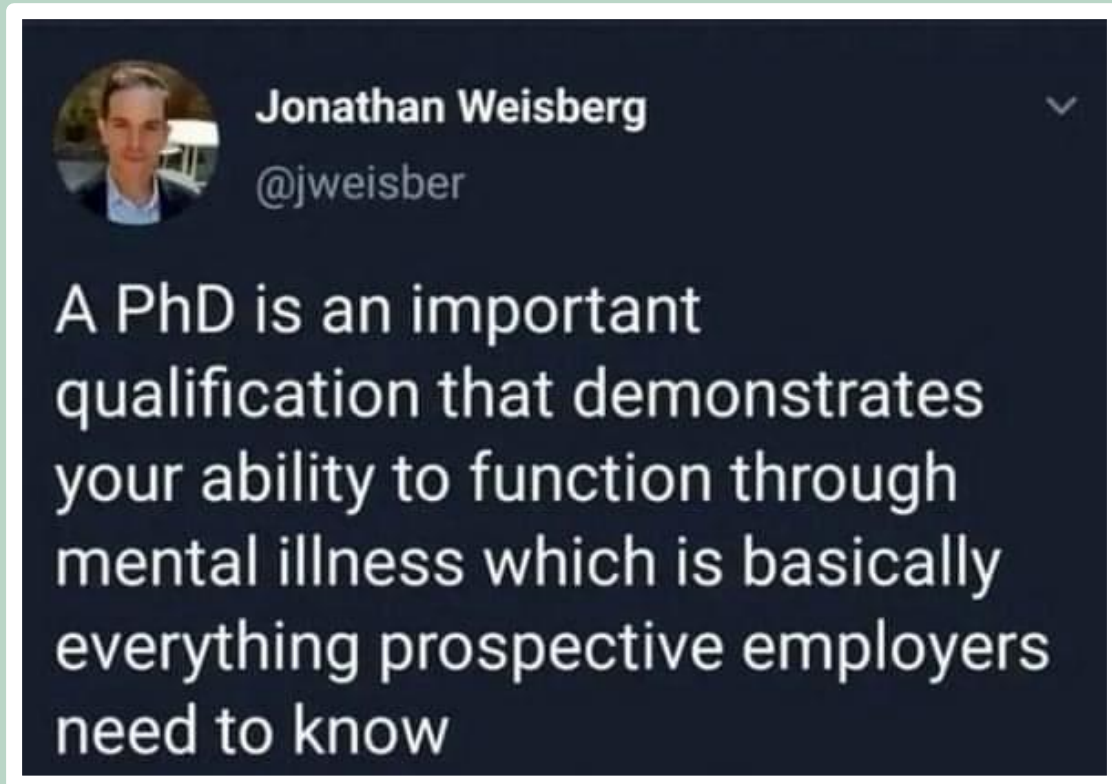
Me: "rests"

Academia: "no, not like that"



Do you sometimes  
have a bad  
conscience when  
taking a break?

# Mental health



# Mental health



The stigma that appears to exist with regards to experiencing mental health difficulties in academia, coupled with the normalizing of chronic stress, likely prevents researchers from accessing support when needed.

Fostering an environment where open discourse around mental health and well-being at work can occur without fear of repercussions, will likely aid in the detection and treatment, and ultimately prevention, of mental health difficulties.

Nicholls, Helen et al. (2022). The impact of working in academia on researchers' mental health and well-being: A systematic review and qualitative meta-synthesis. *PLoS One* 17(5). <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0268890>





Do you confide in  
others when you are  
struggling?

# Precarity and anxiety



**Manasvin Rajagopalan**

@SouthAsianBuoy

Follow



One thing that no one really prepares you for in academia, is the end-stage PhD thought that you have no future in less than six months because there aren't enough jobs and the ones that are around don't want you.

# **The system:** Institutions and academia, job and career

- > Institutional cultures are slow to change.
- > Know the rules and regulations – both formal and informal – that affect you.
- > You can go very far on reflective hard work.
- > Spread yourself neither too thin nor too thick.

# Academia as a broken system



We must acknowledge and work to negate the effects of **financial inequality** and of **minority stress**. Beyond that, we must strive for a kinder evaluation system. The PhD period should allow young scholars to develop their potential. This requires a less publication-driven PhD process and mentors who are more adept at noticing and dealing with the mental well-being of their students. Until that happens, we must be truthful with potential students about the current state of academia. They need to know that **talent and passion might not be enough; that financial security and mental health will play a part in their ability to withstand the stresses of publish or perish**. At the very least, they deserve to know what they're getting themselves into.



**Dr Zoë Ayres**  
@ZJAyres

Academia is not a meritocracy. We are led to believe that if you just work hard enough, sacrifice for a few years through precarity, it'll be enough.

The cruel reality it is likely not enough. Then we internalise that as an \*us\* problem. It's messed up.

Zivony, Alon (2019). Academia is not a meritocracy. *Nature Human Behavior* 3: 1037. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-019-0735-y>



# Timing and luck



Why don't people like to hear this?

**Accepting the importance of luck downplays the extent to which anyone has agency in their professional lives.**

We like to hear that working hard and chasing our dreams brings success in the end. I think for the most part that it's true, and almost everyone who manages to get into the ivory tower will tell you that backstory. But it's akin to hearing an Olympic gold medalist tell you that their secret is dedication and never giving up. As if all the people that didn't come first just weren't dreaming hard enough.

—Markus Eichhorn (ecologist)

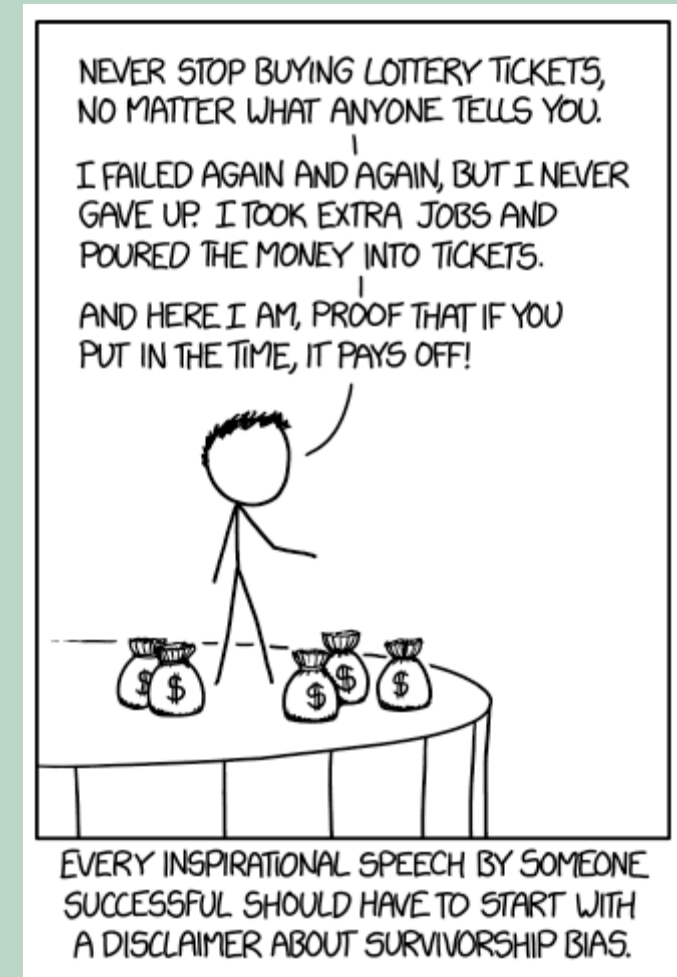
<https://treesinspace.com/2020/05/07/the-role-of-luck-in-academic-careers/>



# Survivorship bias



[...] this bias is entrenched in academia and science, where we often find ourselves giving advice to and setting expectations of those earlier in their careers than us. Most of us have only good intentions when we do so, **but our perspectives are inevitably informed by our own previous experiences and those of our peer-group, all of whom are by definition ‘survivors’**. In doing this we accidentally assume that our peer-group is representative of those earlier in their careers than us, when in fact our peers are actually representative of those who have overcome various rounds of selection.



<https://xkcd.com/1827/>

—Dave Hemprich-Bennett (ecologist)

<https://smallpondscience.com/2020/04/22/the-perils-of-survivorship-bias-in-science-and-academia/>

# Principle of honesty



As scientists, we construct a **narrative of success** that renders our setbacks invisible both to ourselves and to others. Often, other scientists' careers seem to be a constant, streamlined series of triumphs. Therefore, whenever we experience an individual failure, we feel alone and dejected.

So here is my suggestion. Compile an 'alternative' **CV of failures**. Log every unsuccessful application, refused grant proposal and rejected paper. Don't dwell on it for hours, just keep a running, up-to-date tally. If you dare — and can afford to — make it public. It will be six times as long as your normal CV. It will probably be utterly depressing at first sight. But it will remind you of the missing truths, some of the essential parts of what it means to be a scientist — and it might inspire a colleague to shake off a rejection and start again.

Stefan, Michaela (2010). A CV of failures. *Nature* 468: 467. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nj7322-467a>

# CV of failures: Johannes Haushofer

## Degree programs I did not get into

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- 2008      PhD Program in Economics, Stockholm School of Economics
- 2003      Graduate Course in Medicine, Cambridge University  
Graduate Course in Medicine, UCL  
PhD Program in Psychology, Harvard University  
PhD Program in Neuroscience and Psychology, Stanford University
- 1999      BA in International Relations, London School of Economics

## Academic positions and fellowships I did not get

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- 2014      Harvard Kennedy School Assistant Professorship  
UC Berkeley Agricultural and Resource Economics Assistant Professorship  
MIT Brain & Cognitive Sciences Assistant Professorship
- This list is restricted to institutions where I had campus visits; the list of places where I had first-round interviews but wasn't invited for a campus visit, and where I wasn't invited to interview in the first place, is much longer and I will write it up when I get a chance. The list also shrouds the fact that I didn't apply to most of the top economics departments (Harvard, MIT, Yale, Stanford, Princeton, Chicago, Berkeley, LSE) because one of my advisors felt they could not write a strong letter for them.



Would you share your  
CV of failures with  
others?

# Advice

- > take a step back and reflect once in a while
  - > Why am I doing this? Do I (still) want it?
- > find peers to confide in
- > reach out to people (also 'stars' in your discipline)
- > **set boundaries for yourself**, learn to say no
- > have a plan B
- > have a holistic view of your life and yourself ('the bigger picture')
- > for objective career advice, talk to those who left academia as well as those who stayed
- > give the system gentle nudges (if you feel safe doing so) or shake it up completely after having assessed the risks, especially if you are in a position of power
- > seek help if you need it, it's nothing to be embarrassed about and more common than you think

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*To protect my work-life balance, I do not read nor respond to emails outside of my normal working hours. That said, given different time zones, if this email arrives in your inbox out of hours, I don't expect you to read it or reply to it outside of your working hours.*

# Psychologische Studierendenberatung

> <https://www.studierendenberatung.at/>

# PsyOnline

> <https://www.psyonline.at/>

# Change and hope



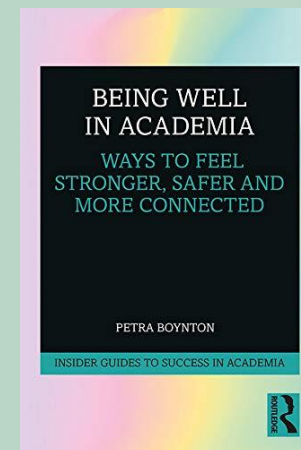
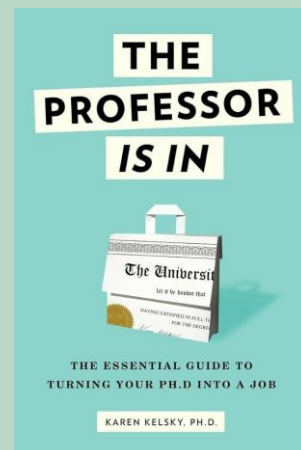
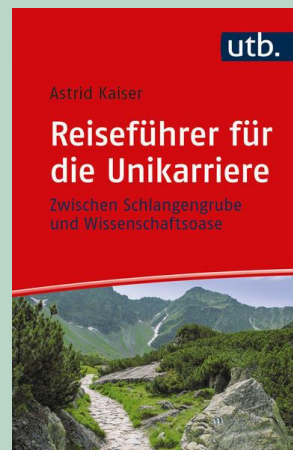
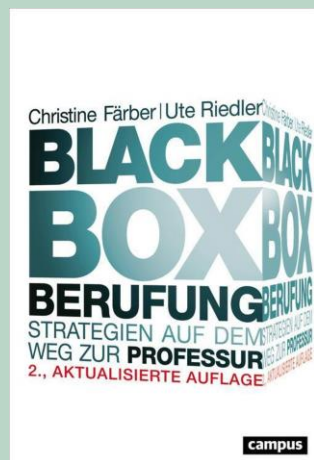
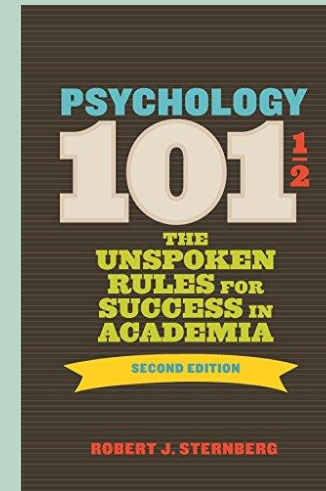
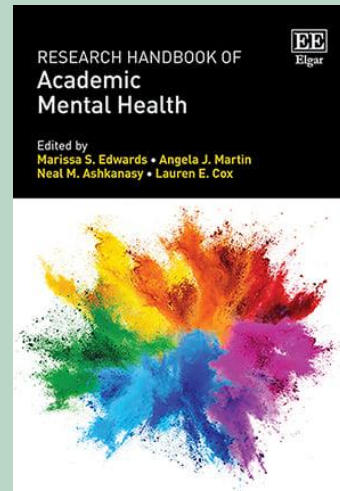
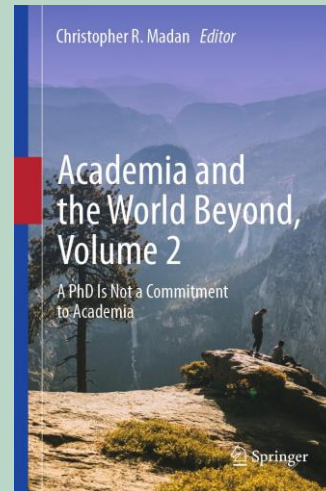
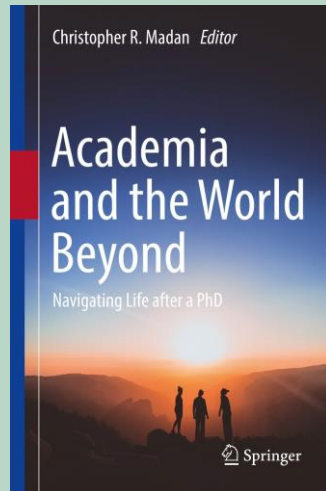
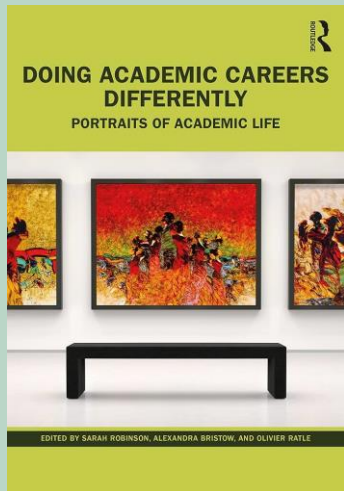
**Heba Gowayed** هبة جويد  
@hebagowayed



Increasingly I'm been seeing more and more academics choose themselves, happiness, and their families over arbitrary notions of institutional prestige and I really think there's a tide shift in people recognizing that this is just a job that's a part of our lives.



# Resources



Thank you for your  
attention!