

# Time out!

## Ayşe Üskül and Michelle Ryan applaud the transformative impact of the British Academy Mid-Career Fellowship scheme



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**A**s researchers progress in their careers, they face a growing number of challenges. There are increasing expectations to take on teaching and administrative duties, which require greater responsibility and initiative, growing numbers of students and postdoctoral fellows to supervise, more and more time spent on external roles, such as journal editing. For some, family responsibilities get added to the mix.

Although it might sound positive and exciting, these increasing duties can mean less time for research, writing, thinking, and reading. Studies that need to be written up for publication start to accumulate. And mid-career academics find themselves yearning for some uninterrupted time that will give them the head space they need to run their projects through the finish line.

Two social psychologists, Ayşe Üskül from the University of Kent, and Mi-

chelle Ryan from the University of Exeter and the University of Groningen, have each benefited from a British Academy Mid-Career Fellowship that has enabled them to focus their time on finishing projects and establishing new research ideas.

In this article, they share their experiences of having that much-needed break from the daily demands of academic life, and describe what this has meant for their research careers.

### **Ayşe**

Shortly after finishing my PhD, I secured a postdoctoral fellowship, awarded to me by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. It funded two years at the Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of Michigan, where I had uninterrupted research time, free from teaching and administrative duties. It was wonderfully enriching, and I realise as I look back that the experience shaped the direction of my academic

career immensely. At the time, I was frequently told that I should cherish every moment of my fellowship, as a similar opportunity would most likely never come my way again.

Yet it did. In the midst of juggling a family with my academic partner working at a different institution in a different city, being practically a single mother to an infant, and having lost my study leave (which I terribly needed to finish off projects) during the transition from one institution to another due to changing jobs, I found out about the Mid-Career Fellowship scheme of the British Academy. It seemed to have been designed exactly to support academics like me, who needed time off from normal teaching and administrative commitments to focus on the

completion of a major piece of research and the dissemination of its findings.

I had just finished a research project (funded by a British Academy Small Research Grant) that examined how adults and children respond to social exclusion in farming and herding communities in north-eastern Turkey. I had already collected data for a series of studies funded by the British Academy grant, but I was asked by journal editors to collect more data in order to clarify some of the unresolved issues in the existing studies. This required more trips to the region (which had to be carefully scheduled to take account of seasonal changes in weather conditions), more time to analyse new data, and more write-up time for dissemination. That meant that I needed extra

time to finish off this project, time that could not be easily planned in my existing schedule. A British Academy Mid-Career Fellowship awarded to me for the academic year 2013–14 came to my rescue. I used every moment of it to run the additional studies and prepare two multi-study papers for submission to the top journal in my field – both of which were eventually published there.

These publications were highly instrumental in helping me establish myself as a researcher who works at the intersection of the economic environment and human behaviour. And this led to a domino effect, making my publications grow in number and scientific impact. For example, they formed the basis of an influential review piece, led to several invitations to contribute chapters to edited volumes, and most recently to an invitation to edit a special issue on socio-ecological psychology.

In addition, the Academy's scheme allowed me to spend time reading the relevant literature in different disciplines (which I hardly get to do during normal working times). This enabled me to see the connections between different disciplines with regard to how they approach the role of economic environment in human psychology and to identify strengths and limitations of the existing work in this field. These observations laid the foundations of a multidisciplinary book project which I co-edited and published with Oxford University Press in 2018 (*Socioeconomic environment and human psychology: Social, ecological, and cultural perspectives*, edited by Uskul and Oishi).

The British Academy Mid-Career Fellowship also helped me make connections outside of academia. As part of the Fellowship, I co-organised a research impact event titled 'Researching Social Exclusion: Relevance for Public Policy and Practice', and it gave me the opportunity to network both with key academics doing research on social exclusion researchers and with non-academic agencies working in the same area. The meeting included presentations from the Three Faiths Forum, Greenwich CID, Schools Linking Network, the McPin Foundation, Age UK, the Economic and Social Research Council, and the Equality and Human Rights Commission.

Allowing me to establish myself as a successful mid-career researcher with links within and beyond academia, the British Academy Mid-Career Fellowship paved the way to a European Research



Professor Ayşe Üskül, shown here on a 2018 field trip to rice farming villages in Japan, conducts research into how different cultural settings shape social cognition, conceptions of self, and interpersonal relationships.

Council (ERC) application. ERC schemes are designed to support individual researchers to carry out scientifically excellent projects, at a larger scale and with greater impact. In the Consolidator scheme, the ERC looks for 'investigators who must have already shown research independence and evidence of maturity'. The Academy's support had helped me to achieve exactly this.

My application to the ERC Consolidator Scheme in 2016 was evaluated positively, but didn't get funded. Two years later, I submitted a significantly revised application, and in October 2018 I heard good news. This ERC funding will allow me to conduct my dream project. Collecting data in 12 different locations, with a focus mostly on cultural groups around the Mediterranean, I will examine the role that honour plays in how people co-operate with others, how they compromise in decision-making situations, and how they apologise for wrongdoings. Through

this project, which will start in September 2019, I will be able to ask novel questions, and explore them in unresearched settings, using multiple methods.

The British Academy Mid-Career Fellowship came at a very critical period in my career, when I was going through multiple transitions as a female academic. It provided a refuge for me to concentrate and continue working on my research, without which I possibly would have slowed down significantly – to the degree that an ERC application (and success) would have been an unreachable goal.

### Michelle

If I think about what has been most helpful for me throughout my academic career, number one on my list would definitely be the excellent mentors and colleagues with whom I have had the privilege to work. But a very close second would be the fellowship grants that I have been lucky enough to hold. The year I

was awarded my PhD (2004), I secured a Research Councils UK (RCUK) Academic Fellowship – a terrific (although unfortunately now defunct) scheme that was designed to help postdoctoral researchers secure a permanent position. The RCUK fellowship funded part of my salary for 5 years, which facilitated my transition into an academic role. It was a wonderful opportunity, giving me the security of a permanent position, with the concentrated research time of a postdoctoral fellow. In this period I had my son (in 2008), and the RCUK kindly extended my fellowship for the length of my 6-month maternity leave.

Within a year of my fellowship ending, I had agreed to take on a 3-year administrative role, as Associate Dean (Research) for our faculty, overseeing the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF) returns for five very different disciplinary 'Units of Assessment'. This was an exciting challenge, which I enjoyed enormous-



Professor Michelle Ryan is conducting research into the role of identity in the work-life balance.

ly; but the burden of the REF and raising a small boy as a single parent took its toll. My research – which looked at the ‘glass cliff’ and women’s leadership positions in times of crisis – still continued, but it was in dire need of an injection of time and energy. The British Academy Mid-Career Fellowship scheme seemed to fit the brief perfectly. I was lucky enough to be awarded a Fellowship for the 2014 calendar year.

The Mid-Career Fellowship allowed me space to step down from the Associate Dean role (once the REF documents had been submitted), and to have the courage to start a new line of research. While our work on the glass cliff was exciting and rewarding, I knew I needed to broaden my research agenda and try something new. I used the full year of uninterrupted research time to develop, somewhat ironically, a new approach to work-life balance – conceptualising it as balancing identity (who one is at home, and who one is at work) instead of just balancing time. The Fellowship allowed me space to draft a theoretical paper on identity and work-life balance, to analyse complex organisational data sets on fit and work-life balance that had been languishing on my computer for years, and to prepare a TedEx talk on to present these ideas to the public.

The British Academy award also enabled me to travel, to extend my network of collaborators – in particular, visiting Cordelia Fine at Melbourne, Tori Brescoll at Yale, and Madeline Heilman at NYU. And it allowed me to establish connections with industry collaborators, such as EY and the NHS. Through these collaborations we developed and extended the analysis of work-life balance to begin thinking about how context and identity might shape other career attitudes, such as those around ambition and risk-taking.

This time and space, which allowed me to explore new and innovative research ideas, was truly a career-enhancing opportunity. I took on a new leadership role in my university at the end of the Fellowship, becoming Dean of Post-Graduate Research and establishing the University of Exeter Doctoral College. However, the new research ideas that we developed during the Fellowship lay a clear foundation for opportunities ahead. Indeed, they led directly to an application for an ERC Consolidator grant, expanding on the ideas of how context and identity shape and constrain women’s career choices.

I prepared the application for the Con-

solidator scheme throughout 2015 (in between many Dean meetings), submitted it early 2016, and was awarded it in November 2016. That ERC funding has allowed me to take my research to the next level. It has given me 5 years of time that I can dedicate almost exclusively to research and mentoring, and has enabled me to bring together an exceptional team of early-career researchers to work on an integrated programme of research. It has also given me time to travel and work with inspiring research groups across Europe and more widely.

But none of this would have been possible without the British Academy Mid-Career Fellowship. It paved the way – giving me intellectual space, giving me practical time to write and analyse data, and giving me the opportunity to make and strengthen collaborative networks. But most of all it gave me confidence – the confidence to try something new, and the confidence to build on those new ideas and take them forwards.

The British Academy Mid-Career Fellowship is an excellent initiative. A scheme that identifies researchers facing obstacles in their career paths, and provides them with what they need – which is mostly just time – is bound to breed future success. The two of us are living examples of how career-defining this can be.

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