



# The lived experiences of current Research Fellows in prestigious fellowship schemes

Christos Petichakis

Eli Saetnan

Lynn Clark

# Project Overview

- To investigate Fellows' perceptions of their role in relation
  - ❑ departmental culture
  - ❑ peer recognition
  - ❑ decision making (from postdoc years) of career progression
  - ❑ *journey* towards academic post

# Research Questions

- How decisions and/or actions taken by postdoctoral researchers helped them to prepare a successful research fellowship application?
- Which lived experiences and professional attributes appear to give them the competitive edge towards being successful in their fellowship?

→ Our focus is on the personal meaning they provide in their particular context



# Previous Research

- Careers in Research Online Survey (CROS)
  - Institutional data and UK aggregate results (Vitae, 2015<sup>1</sup>)
- Postdoc career development and progression
  - Literature Review (amongst many - Åkerlind, 2005 & 2009; Felisberti & Sear, 2014; McAlpine, 2014; McAlpine & Emmioğlu, 2015)
- Vitae Resources (Concordat, RDF)

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.vitae.ac.uk/vitae-publications/reports/vitae-careers-in-research-online-survey-report-2015-for-cros.pdf>

# Methodology

## **Study Design**

Qualitative approach, ethics approval, purposively selected sample (n=4), semi-structured interviews

## **Research Method**

Audio recorded interviews, transcribed and analysed

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) by Smith et al. (2008)

# Qualitative approach

- Lived experiences
  - Structuring interview questionnaire around key themes
    - About You (previous & current role)
    - Own experiences leading to a successful application
    - Recent experiences in the fellowship scheme
    - Career development during and beyond fellowship
    - Reflecting past fellowship & mentoring others

Defining phenomenon  
influencing their being

Interpreting the lived  
experiences

Reflecting on journey  
through their lived  
experiences

# Sample

- Purposively selected based on characteristics of Fellows' roles and focus of the study – focusing on their lived experiences

Participant	Gender	Status	Discipline	Funder
P1	M	Fellow	S&E	Research Charity
P2	M	Academic	S&E	Research Council
P3	F	Fellow	S&E	Research Charity
P4	M	Academic	S&E	Research Council

# IPA (Smith et al., 2009)

- From *the examination* of subjective experiences in relation to a specific phenomenon (Fellowship journey)
  - Occurring at a particular moment (before and during being successful)
  - What it (fellowship) means to the individual (exploration of meaning and sense-making)
- To *the interpretation* of these experiences to form a coherent plan (following IPA steps)
  1. Reading and re-reading
  2. Initial noting (descriptive to conceptual comments)
  3. Noting emergent themes
  4. Connecting across themes and cases (interviewees)



Soria Moria  
Castle  
(Norwegian  
folktale)



# Emerging Themes

Having **Freedom** to explore own interests

- Fun and enjoyment
- Time to explore own path
- Gaining Independence

Establishing/maintaining/  
managing **Relationships**

- Negotiating conflicting demands/ challenging relationships
- Departmental politics / academic hierarchy
- Collaborating and networking

Being **supported**

- Key individual supporters (PI, university systems, past successful applicants)
- Having a plan

Being **lucky**

- Unexpected opportunities
- Lottery funding
- Got luck with application (funders' criteria)

# Findings

How decisions and/or actions taken by postdoctoral researchers helped them to prepare a successful research fellowship application?

Having **Freedom** to explore own interests

*“Having fun and taking the opportunities that come up and do some nice research but also try to not shut myself in but be open to what’s actually opportunities which come up” (P3)*

Establishing/maintaining/managing **Relationships**

*“I should have applied sooner but what would have really enable me to do that, was if someone had, like, you know said to me in a PDR or just in passing, I think you should apply for a fellowship, I think you are good enough and you are ready to do it and as a department we will support you” (P1)*

Being **supported**

*“the supervisor that I had were supportive, that they let me, they gave me time to write this proposal to try to become independent researcher” (P4)*

*“I felt the supervision I was receiving was falling short, ... papers were happening without any involvement from the PI, apart from checking his surname was correctly spelt in the paper” (P3)*

Being **lucky**

*“I was fortunate, ... to be working in a priority area. I like to think the idea, the core idea underlying the fellowship is reasonably unusual and reasonably novel. And in sort of the best tradition of British science, its slightly quirky. Its not entirely along the mainstreams. “ (P2)*

*“I was quite lucky in my PhD, I was given a lot of space and a lot of responsibility. I think this helped me to be able to project manage because I learnt at an early age to do things for my-self.” (P1)*

# Findings

Which lived experiences and professional attributes appear to give them the competitive edge towards being successful in their fellowship?

Having **Freedom** to explore own interests

*“... spinning plates, ... I mean there is a pressure on everyone to keep the money coming in, but a successful one is an academic who isn't living hand to mouth in terms of the funding, but has a bit of a leeway.” (P1)*

Establishing/maintaining/managing **Relationships**

*“You are in a new institution. So you have to sort of work two ways out, you have to work out being independent and a new job but you also have to work out how this new institution is working because you actually changed.” (P3)*

*“... is evolving our actions and what we do as a research group and what this would do if we do get it would give me the time to do that because that's a time intensive process. It means that I've got to go off, I've got to meet a load of new collaborators, I've got to keep identifying new people to work with” (P2)*

Being **supported**

*“The problem is that the promotion and career path does not evaluate very positively team playing and cooperative work. It is all about me me me me me me...” (P4)*

Being **lucky**

*“If you are lucky enough to get a fellowship ... you should not just sit back and behave like an academic, sort of like typical lecturer. I think you should take all the opportunities and all the freedom you have because you're not employed with teaching duties ..., to actually explore what's going on” (P3)*

# Path to accomplishing Target/ reaching the “Castle”

Pre & early stage

Mid stage

Post stage

Mentoring

Departmental  
priorities/politics

Research  
ideas

Evolving ideas

Role  
security

Status

Competitive funding

Track record

Networks  
(int/ext)

Leadership

Career support



## The Target / Reaching the Castle

Peer Recognition  
Impactful research  
Pursuit of own research interests  
Mentoring/research group impact

# Conclusion

- New targets, new challenges
- Re-evaluating own targets
- Being independent but having dependents
- Integration and support

# References

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# What do you think?

- How do our findings compare to your own experiences?
- What are the implications of this for your practice?