

Dr Sevasti-Melissa Nolas

What is your current position?

I'm a Senior Lecturer in Social Work, University of Sussex.
<http://www.sussex.ac.uk/profiles/20805>

Could you say a bit about your career trajectory so far? How did you get to be where you are today?

Trajectory gives the impression of a straight line. My arrival to where I am today feels more meandering. I fell in love with doing research while studying for an MSc in Social Psychology at the London School of Economics. As it goes with these things I didn't get a research role immediately upon graduation and I spent a year doing Press and PR for current affairs television programming. That was lots of fun but with a background in social constructionism, Foucault and the rest, it was hard to pick up the phone each time and tell journalists that the documentary we'd just sent them was the best/most tragic/uplifting story they would have encountered since the last documentary I spoke to them about the week before. Fortunately for all involved, in the course of the next year some research work came my way which eventually became a full-time role and I joined a team of organisational social psychologists (who remain some of my best friends) back at the LSE. From there I registered for a doctorate in Social Psychology at the same institution which I completed in 2008. I've always had a pull towards practice and following my PhD spent 2 years working at The Anna Freud Centre, a children's mental health charity in a research role while also having the opportunity to implement the charity's newly developed children's participation strategy. During this time I also did some freelance leadership development coaching on the MBA programme at London Business School. In 2010 I went back into academia joining the Psychology Department at Middlesex University before arriving at my current department at Sussex University in September 2011. Since March 2014 I have bought out most of my time to focus on a European Research Council Starting Grant (ERC-StG-335514) I won to carry out a comparative ethnography on the relationship between childhood and public life in three cities (Athens, Hyderabad, London). I'm loving every moment of it (well, every research moment of it because project management of grants is a different story). I got to where I am today through working stupidly crazy hours (until I became a mum), but also because I've been incredibly lucky to be surrounded by inspiring, creative and supportive friends and colleagues who believe in what I do, and remind me why what I'm doing is important in those moments when I've lost the faith myself, who help me think through the curve balls that work and life throw up, and from whom I learn so much. I've had some lucky breaks (right place, right time) and the guidance and support of a handful of generous senior colleagues along the way. Finally, my super supportive husband and our funny little boy at home remind me that work is just that.

When did you decide to be an academic? What was it that prompted this decision?

Good question. I would say that research found me. I decided I wanted to do research during my Masters. That's when I got hooked. I love the creativity it entails, at the same time as the need to be systematic. I love listening to diverse people talk about their lives and trying to think through and trouble complex problems. I also love thinking about ways to communicate

research to members of the public. I also love teaching and being in contact with students and supervising doctoral students. I'm not so sure about the other aspects of the contemporary academic role especially with the increased pressure of audit and managerialism.

What have been the challenges so far in your career in academia?

Finding the right department for the research I do. While I trained as a social psychologist my work is interdisciplinary and quite policy focused (youth development, domestic violence, children's participation) and it wasn't until I joined my current Department in Social Work, also an interdisciplinary field, that my own research agenda flourished. The other challenge is more recent and has to do with balancing a demanding role with childcare responsibilities. There is a hard end to the day and, energy permitting, a return to work after my son has gone to sleep some evenings. I have had to change the way I work and try to become more efficient with my time but at times it is frustrating and a logistical challenge especially when international travel is involved.

What advice would/do you give to other female academics?

Say 'no'. And if at first you are not heard then say 'no' again. And don't be afraid to say 'no' for third time if necessary. Learn early on to distinguish 'opportunities' that will help you get where you want to go from those 'opportunities' that serve others' ends. Have an idea of your direction of travel, even if that changes along the way and be willing to go sideways and to detour to get ahead. I've learnt the most and had the most fun going off-piste. Practice self-care and take care of those around you. Pull others up with you.