

Dr Clodhna O'Connor

What is your current position?

Lecturer in Psychology, Maynooth University

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

I was very lucky that the grant that funded my PhD also facilitated a year-long postdoctoral position. This turned out to be a great first step in my postdoc career, because it gave me the space to turn the vast majority of my PhD thesis into publications and initiate some new follow-on studies. Since the grant was in my own name, I also had the freedom to organize a 3-month research visit to Princeton University. All this meant that I was in as good a position as I could be when applying for postdoc and lectureship positions. After five years in the UK I had decided I wished to return home to Ireland, so I moved to Dublin and took up a temporary research job that would keep me going until a more permanent opportunity arose. After a few months in Ireland, a lectureship position came up in Maynooth University and fortunately my application was successful.

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

I'm not sure if there ever was a concrete decision! I had always felt comfortable in academic settings, and it felt natural to move from undergrad onto Masters and PhD studies. I enjoy the autonomy that comes with an academic job, and the freedom to (mostly) set my working day according to my interest and inclination rather than external duty. I think this freedom will be a huge advantage in the longer term, when it comes to balancing work and family responsibilities. There are certainly negative aspects of the job (particularly that work and leisure time do tend to bleed into each other), but so far they seem to be outweighed by the positives for me.

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

Trying to make my career trajectory fall in line with my personal objectives. For personal reasons, I decided to move home to Ireland last year. Since Ireland is a small and currently economically-pressured country, which has no strong tradition of research in my field, I knew that this decision would involve some career sacrifices. In preparation for this, I did all I could to optimise my publications, funding record and professional network beforehand, so that I would have the 'capital' that would allow me exercise some control over my career options. Since you can't control external factors like the materialisation of job vacancies in institutions near your home, I think it's important to get yourself into a position where you can be proactive in creating your own opportunities if need be.

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

Appreciate the importance of saying no. Early in your career, often the temptation is to say yes to every opportunity that comes your way. But since your time and resources are necessarily limited, it's important to be judicious in accepting new responsibilities, and realistically consider whether the advantages that will accrue from a particular task will justify the effort invested.