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An academic 'life story'

Probably in common with many in my field, I did not set out to become an academic. I had been working as an English language teacher for around 15 years, and I was in something of a rut, both personally and professionally. Scrolling through jobs.ac.uk one day, I stumbled upon an ad for PhD scholarships specialising in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and thus began my journey from Tokyo to the damp North West of England, where I sit today.

Since graduating six years ago, I have worked as a learning developer, research associate, teaching fellow, lecturer and now senior lecturer. With regard to academic publishing, before I left Japan, I had already published a short article in a professional teaching journal. While completing my PhD, I published two journal articles, and since graduating I have published a further five articles, one book chapter, and one monograph, as well as various blog pieces and book reviews.

Presented this way, my research trajectory sounds rather neat and tidy: a straightforward story of progression towards more senior academic roles and the all-important 'track record' of publication. This is the success story I have told to potential employers and funders, but of course behind it lies a messier truth that looks less like the single, elegant arc of a trajectory and more like an assault course beset with obstacles.

Above, I refer to six years, and list five different job titles. In fact, I had seven different posts in this period (three with the same title) in four different universities in three different corners of England. While in the final year of my PhD, I took a job as a learning developer. This was classed as a 'professional' rather than an 'academic' role. It was a permanent post within academia, but did not include any time for research.

In the two years I worked as a learning developer, I did not publish anything, and it took a further two years after leaving this post before any publications appeared in print, so there is a four-year gap in my publication record. You may also have noticed the mention of 15 years in relation to my teaching career. I was 40 years old when I started my PhD, which is worth bearing in mind when I talk about the challenges of being an 'early-career scholar' or what is sometimes referred to as a 'junior researcher' or 'novice academic'. I never really felt like a novice, and my journey into academia has always felt more like a slow evolution than the start of a new career.

My next post was my perfect job: as a research associate on a project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. Perfect, that is, aside from the fact that it was only funded for two years. These two years were extremely fruitful in terms of scholarly writing and acted as the springboard to establishing a publication trajectory, but there were setbacks along the way, which I describe in more detail below.

My stint as a research associate was followed by three part time, temporary teaching posts, which were, for reasons I describe below, not conducive to scholarly writing even though much writing was done during that time. Eventually, I found a lectureship at a university commutable from where I live. The contract was temporary, but it has been extended several times, I am now a senior lecturer, albeit still on a temporary contract.

As I set out to explore my transition from a PhD student to an ‘established’ academic, I wonder what makes one ‘established’ and what gives me the right to occupy this subject position. Does this rest on time passed since the completion of my PhD? Having published more than once or twice? Having published a monograph? Being invited to do peer-review? Securing a permanent post that involves teaching and research? Being Included in the UK’s research evaluation scheme, the REF? I have passed some, but not all of these milestones and the truth is I do not feel very ‘established’. In particular, I still do not have a permanent academic post. My trajectory has been characterised by highs and lows, with moments when I have wanted to give up, and moments when I have felt like the luckiest woman alive. The writing I have published tells the world about who I am as a researcher, but as I navigated different roles, many of them precarious, much of it has been produced at times of struggle and doubt.

This chapter aims to demonstrate, with reference to my own experience, the ways in which academic publishing by early-career scholars both shapes and is shaped by wider socio-political forces in the academic job market and in higher education more broadly. I take as my starting point the understanding that scholarly writing is both social and ideological. Having described my own academic ‘life story’, I outline the theoretical lens that this autoethnographically-oriented account takes, before exploring my own writing experience in relation to three types of contextual factors that have influenced its development. I briefly discuss factors that have played a facilitative role in developing my academic writing before reflecting on the personal cost of this journey.

The theoretical and methodological lenses

Academic writing for publication lies at the heart of what it means to be an academic and is closely intertwined with the notion of identity. Early-career scholars are in the process of carving out their research niche and figuring out what sort of academic they want to be. Writing is an integral part of this as it is one of the central means by which legitimate membership of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) can be claimed. It is therefore an important marker of identity, legitimacy and of status in the academy. As French (2019) has noted, the feeling that one can make a meaningful contribution to one’s disciplinary network is key to early-career scholars’ sense of being accepted as a disciplinary insider. However, the journey from periphery to centre may not be as unproblematic as the community of practice model implies. Gourlay (2011), for instance, investigated new lecturers’ transition to the textual practices of their academic discourse communities and found that Lave and Wenger’s conditions for a community of practice: shared repertoire, mutual endeavour, and expert-novice interaction, were not consistently met. Instead, novice lecturers were plagued by a sense of confusion, isolation and inauthenticity.

Scholarly writing is a site of struggle for newcomers because it entails not simply language, but also the cultures, practices, identities, structures, and ideologies that facilitate and constrain text. In this sense, it is a form of social practice (Duff, 2010) situated within its socio-cultural context. An academic literacy studies perspective on scholarly writing (Barton, 2007; Gee, 2000) takes account of the ways disciplinary, institutional, and wider socio-cultural issues and priorities can shape academics’ writing practices. It is this theoretical perspective on scholarly writing that informs this chapter.

The socially situated nature of scholarly writing means that autoethnography is a suitable method for investigating the lived experience of scholarly writers, as it acknowledges the role played by one's location and identity (Canagarajah, 2012) in conducting research. Gee, for example, stated that "reading and writing only makes sense when studied in the context of social and cultural practices of which they are part" (Gee, 2000, p. 180). While the *auto* element of autoethnography entails the study of the self, the *ethno* element facilitates the examination of "cultural ways of utilising written language" (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 7). In their study of post-doctoral academics, Skakni, Calatrava Moreno, Seuba and McAlpine (2013) found that early-career scholars' personal and professional identities were inseparable, and a broadly autoethnographic account allows both of these dimensions to be taken into account.

The story of my scholarly writing development is a personal one, but it is embedded within the broader context of the UK higher education and three intersecting aspects of this context that have mediated its development: the geolinguistic, the geographical and the geopolitical. In the account below, I describe the discursive and non-discursive (Canagarajah, 1996) challenges and opportunities I have encountered in connection with these and how they have interacted with what Skakni et al. (2013) describe as the institutional, networking and intellectual strands of a research career trajectory.

Contextual factors that have influenced my scholarly writing trajectory

The language factor

The first contextual factor that has had, at once, a huge influence and no influence at all on my scholarly publishing is language. English, the lingua franca of international research, is my mother tongue, and in this sense, language has been a non-issue in my own publishing efforts. I have never considered publishing in any other language since I do not know any other languages well enough for this to be an option. At the level of the self, then, language is of no relevance to my development as an academic writer. Drawing the lens back, however, to see the self as embedded within culture and context, it is clear that only someone in a position of privilege can claim such a stance. My native tongue gives me the unearned privilege of facing virtually no linguistic barriers to publishing in an international context. Of course, this does not guarantee success. Hyland (2016) and Habibie (2016) have pointed out that academic discourse must be learned by everyone, including those with English as their first language. Ivanič (1998) and others have shown that academic writing is an 'act of identity' (p. 32) that extends far beyond linguistic structure and form, to encompass socio-rhetorical, epistemological, process and disciplinary dimensions.

Confidence in writing for publication, even in one's first language, may be linked to educational background or social class, and even Anglophone scholars experience difficulties and self-doubt in attempting to navigate the academic publishing landscape. Hyland (2016) claims that being a native speaker of English therefore brings no particular advantage. However, as Politzer-Ahles, Holliday, Girolamo, Sychalska and Harper Berkson (2016) have observed, the concept of 'privilege' does not mean that everything is easy for native English speakers. Rather, it means that whatever barriers I *have* faced in building a track record of publication, language was not one of them perhaps in part due to my experience of studying and teaching language and linguistics, including academic writing. I

loved academic writing, felt at home there and, if anything, embraced its potential as a way to transcend issues such as social class. When I speak, I am immediately seen as different from most of my academic colleagues and perhaps as not quite belonging because I have an accent that is associated with low social prestige in the UK (Donnelly, Barratta & Gamsu, 2019). When I write, I am freed of this prejudice and can communicate with my peers on an equal footing. I love the feeling of an argument falling into place, when an idea pushes my thinking forward, and when I read something I've been working on and think, 'Yes, this is what I wanted to say'. In this sense, academic writing represents a discursive opportunity to me. Overall, geolinguistic factors have meant that I have experienced few discursive struggles and, rather, enjoyed what Lillis and Curry call a "geolinguistic advantage" (2010, p. 6) in my academic writing endeavours.

Geographical place

The second contextual factor in the development of my scholarly writing is my geographical place in the world. I was born in Scotland and live and work in England, one of the richest countries in a relatively rich continent. This places me, personally and professionally, in a 'centre' rather than a peripheral context in Canagarajah's terms (2002, p. 7). The higher education sector in the UK is relatively well-resourced in that most universities have the social and material resources needed to facilitate research writing, including well-stocked libraries that subscribe to major international journals and ready access to research networks that can foster publishing opportunities. Throughout my PhD, I could apply for funding to attend international conferences. When I worked as a research associate, funding for attending conferences was built into the grant, so in the two years of work there, I presented at numerous conferences in the UK and internationally. Being British, it is relatively easy to travel internationally without applying for visas and sponsorship. I had a computer and the basic software I needed. This is in contrast to those in peripheral or semi-peripheral contexts who have documented non-discursive challenges such as resources and access to research networks (Abdeljaoued, 2018; Englander & Corcoran, 2019; Lillis & Curry, 2010; Salager-Meyer, 2014). As I had access to stimulating talks, books and articles, and could extend these networks by attending conferences, this aspect of context has brought few challenges and some non-discursive advantages in terms of the networking and intellectual strands of academic life that facilitate scholarly writing.

Geopolitical factors: Precarious employment practices

The third contextual influence on the development of my writing for publication is closely related to my geographical location: the geopolitical context, as manifested in English higher education through precarious employment and research evaluation practices. I discuss employment practices in this section, and research evaluation practices in the next section.

The UK higher education sector is highly marketised and has high mobility of both staff and students. One effect of this is that the academic job market has become more competitive, and employment conditions have worsened. Recruitment onto PhD programmes has increased far faster than the number of vacancies (Larson, Ghaffarzadegan & Xue, 2013) meaning that more candidates are applying for each academic position. At the same time, insecure fixed-term contracts are now the norm for early-career scholars. According to the University College Union, more than half of all academic staff are on insecure or fixed-term contracts (Grove, 2016; UCU, 2020).

Since completing my PhD almost six years ago, my only permanent job has been in a non-research position, which I then left in favour of a temporary job as a research associate because insecurity felt like a price worth paying for gaining research experience. I was only in the luxurious position of being able to pay this price because I do not have dependents relying on my income. The research position was externally funded by a research council for two years. Financially, it was a gamble, but I reasoned that I would produce research outputs, which would make me more employable in the long term. But, of course, research outputs tend to cluster at the end of a project and they take time to appear in print, so by the time the funding ended, I was job-hunting with a CV that listed my last publication as four years ago. While, once upon a time, having any publications at all would have been a bonus, employers were now looking for that 'strong track record' of publications.

I then taught in three part-time, temporary posts scattered around the country. One was in London, one in the South West of England, and one in the North West. Although I loved working with students and the experience of different university systems was valuable, this period of my career was characterised by self-doubt. I wondered how long I would be stuck in these low-status, insecure posts, and why I could not get something better. Aside from the personal and financial insecurity, I experienced frustration and loss of academic identity. I spent a lot of time (and money) on trains and sleeping in friends' spare rooms. I did not have an office in any of the universities I worked at and would meet my students in whatever windowless storeroom happened to be free, sometimes on a different floor from the rest of the department. I would travel to each institution for two or three days per month, filling those days with supervision meetings and doing the rest of my work remotely. I could not attend research seminars or other training or social events or get to know the other academics because the limited days that I was physically present were filled with student meetings. As a temporary teaching fellow, one is not invited to departmental meetings, since the role does not include any administrative or management duties relevant to the running of the department. This meant that I could not build the kind of meaningful relationships that are so important to scholarly writing (Tusting, McCulloch, Bhatt, Hamilton & Barton, 2019), nor engage in professional networking that might lead to shared research and collaborative scholarly publication. No-one knew me as a researcher, and before long, I hardly knew myself due to my uncertain status.

Early-career scholars are likely to be negotiating multiple identities as they learn their various roles within a department and institution, as members of their discipline and as emerging researchers (Warhust, 2008). When there are multiple role changes in a relatively short time, this can lead to an academic identity crisis. In a study of early-career academics in the UK and Sweden, Skakni et al. (2013) found that those in post-doctoral positions had blurred institutional status and this led them to fear not being intellectually recognized by their disciplinary community. This was also my own experience. I continued working on publications with my colleagues from my previous post, but I had to squeeze this writing in between my three other jobs. The time lag between writing and publication meant that my CV did not look particularly impressive, making it hard to get a permanent post. I knew that this 'publication gap' in my CV was harming my chances, and it did not help that I could see another gap looming on the horizon. Although research outputs were in progress, I could not embark on any new projects as none of my three teaching posts included any research time or responsibility. Aside from the issue of time, one cannot apply for research funding unless one's employment contract lasts at least as long as the funding period. These

employment conditions for early-career scholars make it less likely that they will be able to establish a track record of publications, and thus secure a permanent post.

After a year and a half of working in these precarious posts, I had almost given up. A low point came when I received, on the same day, an appraisal document praising the high quality of my work and a rejection letter for a permanent lectureship in the same department. Juggling multiple insecure posts presented an emotional challenge to my scholarly writing, in that my research capability was reduced by both practical constraints and by loss of academic identity. The emotional side of trying to establish a track record of publications was, at times, the most difficult aspect of my academic writing life, but the affective dimensions of academic writing are relatively under-researched (although see French, 2018; Heron, Gravett & Yakovchuk, 2020; Sword, Sorrenson & Ballard, 2019). My failure to secure a job that included research led me to doubt that my research was good enough. I reflected on my research areas and wondered if these were not considered relevant enough, or if my research not rigorous enough. Not only did I doubt my own choices and expertise, but I began to doubt that academia was for me. Did I really want to put myself through this gruelling experience of constantly competing with others and being found wanting? Gill (2016) has highlighted many of the 'hidden injuries' of neoliberal academia, such as exhaustion, guilt, shame and feelings of 'out of placeness' (p. 40) and has argued that these are consequences of the hyper-competitive system of becoming a full academic 'citizen'.

Geopolitical factors: Research evaluation regimes

The second element of the geopolitical context that has influenced my academic writing is the UK's research evaluation and funding regime. Changes since 2010 in the way British higher education is funded mean that universities now compete with each other to recruit international students, whose tuition fees make up a large part of their income. Institutions are branded, marketed, evaluated and ranked in numerous league tables, operating in what Warren (2017) calls a 'status economy', whereby their main currency in this global market is their status according to international rankings. The data that feed into these rankings come from a set of performance indicators, including the UK's national Research Excellence Framework (REF). This is the national research evaluation system whereby academics' research outputs are rated, the scores in a given unit aggregated, and government funding allocated accordingly (REF, 2014). The REF is not only a direct means of allocating funding; it also affects universities' ability to attract income from tuition fees because REF scores feed into league tables.

Most universities in the UK manage academics' scholarly writing in order to score highly in the REF and thus secure income and status. This includes policies around minimum numbers of outputs to be published, types of publications to be produced and venues in which these should be published (Tusting et al., 2019). Academics' scholarly writing is, therefore, often linked to promotion or probation conditions, which places them under enormous pressure and looms large over their sense of identity. This can be particularly problematic for early-career scholars. For example, the policies around the REF can mean that single-authored papers are given more status than co-authored papers and that academics are forced to target journals with high impact factors (McCulloch, 2017a). However, it may be unrealistic to expect those at the beginning of their careers to publish in the highest-ranking journals,

which typically have rejection rates of around 90%. For early-career scholars, an important way of getting a foothold in scholarly publishing is to work with a more experienced colleague, but if co-authored papers are seen as less prestigious for REF purposes, then they may feel pressured to publish alone. Early-career academics are more vulnerable to these pressures because accruing highly-rated outputs of the 'right' type in the 'right' venues is seen as essential to securing a permanent post (McCulloch, 2017a).

The most recent REF period in the UK was 2014-2021, which that my stint as a research associate falls within it. In total, this period resulted in four journal articles, one book chapter and one monograph. These, plus another article from a different project mean that I have met my current department's expectations in terms of the REF, and reached the UK's version of academic Nirvana by becoming 'REF-able' (McCulloch, 2017b). Nirvana is a misnomer; it is more of weight off my mind than a state of bliss. Furthermore, although these publications stemmed from the research project that I worked on then, the majority of the writing took place after the project funding had ended, when I was no longer employed on the project. In this sense, that work that made me REF-able was mainly unpaid and written in my own time, when I was employed in three teaching posts. It was produced in addition to my paid work and involved significant personal sacrifice. I was only able to make such sacrifices because I do not have dependents. Life events common for early-career scholars such as having children or caring for elderly parents are likely to make such productivity difficult, and this has a disproportionate impact on women (Ivancheva, Lynch & Keating, 2019). I am sure I am not alone in having female friends who had to choose between an academic career and starting a family because they could only find insecure work, often many miles from their partners.

Nevertheless, in addition to relentless work, there were other factors that helped to facilitate my writing, and it is worth considering these.

Facilitating research writing

As a research associate, my main role was to collect and analyse data and disseminate the results of the project that we were working on. Research was, in theory, my only task. I did some teaching and supervision and helped to convene a research group, but this was just a few hours per week, and I had very little administrative work.

I enjoyed several luxuries as a research associate that I have never enjoyed before or since, namely my own office and the time not only to write, but also to read and to immerse myself in data. These conditions are similar to those identified by Sword (2017) in her book *Air & Light & Time & Space: How Successful Academics Write*. Tusting et al. (2019) found similar factors to be helpful in establishing a positive writing culture, but also included relationships and collaborations. These latter two conditions were also facilitative in my two years as a research associate. I worked in a cross-disciplinary team, with three members from Linguistics and two from Educational Research. Every few weeks, we would meet to discuss the data collected so far and to develop our analytical framework. We also had a reading group where we would read and discuss an article relevant to the project. As a result of these interactions, I was able not only to engage with disciplinary knowledge, but also to build productive relationships framed around common research interests. Unlike

Gourlay's (2011) participants, I found that these relationships facilitated my legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

This sort of working environment helped to lay the foundations for my scholarly writing by fostering networks and building supportive relationships, although, as noted above, most of the actual writing occurred after the project ended. We wrote the project book collaboratively, working in pairs on various chapters before passing these to the others in the team for feedback. In terms of the micro-processes of writing, this was also extremely useful. I had to learn to write in a different style and to negotiate differing understandings of how a paper should look, what literature should be drawn on, how deadlines should be interpreted, and how much effort should be expended on these matters. Prior to this project, all my academic writing had been single-authored, so co-writing was a new experience for me. There could be tensions as well as pleasures, but I look back on this period of my academic life as a kind of golden age of learning and achievement as a researcher.

Moving closer to the present, in 2018 I found a fixed-term position as a lecturer in a university relatively close to my home. This was a step forward in that it was a 'proper' academic post, one that was not marked as a marginal, 'blurred' or junior position. On the other hand, it was not what I'd hoped for in a number of ways. First, it was temporary and thus, still precarious to a degree. Secondly, this was a so-called teaching-focused university. Thus, although research was officially part of my role, it was not given high priority. I was given time for research but also felt actively discouraged from using this time. Another consequence of working in a teaching-focused institution is that there are fewer research groups and a less well-funded research infrastructure in general. Despite these challenges, I am still there and I am now a senior lecturer. I have been lucky enough to secure funding for a couple of research projects, and new publications are in the pipeline. Aside from the space, time, and positive relationships that facilitated my scholarly writing, therefore, institutional factors also play an important role (Skakni et al, 2013) and one that is not always unequivocally positive.

Reflections and conclusions

Reflecting on my own experience has enabled me to see that it is the interaction between several factors that has made my publishing journey messy but also modestly successful. Despite the advantages of having English as my first language and living in a rich country, the precarious academic job market in the UK makes getting published challenging. I have enjoyed opportunities to build fruitful research relationships but have also struggled to find the time to write under a mountain of other work. These non-discursive factors relate to the institutional and networking strands of academic life, and they interact with the intellectual strand, which would not flourish without them. This is why we need to see scholarly writing not as a transparent medium for communicating information but as a site of often conflicting sets of priorities and identities. My writing has been influenced by the geolinguistic, geographic and geopolitical landscape but also mediated by my personal choices, goals and preferences.

So what has this account revealed? I thought it had revealed, among other things, the damaging effects on scholarly writing of higher education job market and the UK's research

evaluation system. However, when I sent a first draft of this chapter to my friend, she returned it to me with the following comment:

You mention **nothing** about the cost: emotional, physical health-related, and financial. I think you have dismissed these really important factors and if you want to speak to an audience of writers starting out you should at least acknowledge the personal cost to yourself!!

This made me realise that perhaps I had put too positive a spin on my scholarly writing trajectory. I have talked about my love for writing, but this drive can be exploited by employers who demand that we write without providing the appropriate conditions for writing to thrive. My own desire to write, to seek status, to find a permanent post, to be REF-able, mean that I have sacrificed aspects of my personal life to do it. Even now, as a senior lecturer, I am writing this chapter at weekends and during my leave because I do not have enough time during the working week. Not everyone can manage this, and no-one should have to. Women in particular may have caring responsibilities that prevent them from devoting the hundreds of hours of unpaid labour that I have spent on building a track record.

I hope that the final draft of this chapter tells a more honest story, showing that building a track record of publications takes total commitment in the face of challenging circumstances. My own process of learning to write for scholarly publication has not been an unbroken trajectory from periphery to centre but has been characterized by insecurity and exhaustion as well as pleasure and pride. It is crucial for early-career scholars to develop critical awareness of how the geolinguistic, geographic and geopolitical contexts in which their own scholarly writing is situated can affect their writing and identity. By doing this, they may find ways to resist, to protect their writing time and foster a positive notion of what it means to be a successful early-career scholar. All academics need to resist the unrealistic pressures placed on their writing, but the issues are more acute for early-career scholars due to their precarious position and the threats these pose to their nascent academic identities.

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