

Anna Phillips, BSc Psychology

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Dr Anna Phillips talks about getting relevant experience to pursue a career as an academic researcher, and how her degree in the School of Psychology benefited her.

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Read the transcript

I am Dr Anna Phillips and I am a reader in behavioural medicine, working in the University of Birmingham; in the school of sport and exercise sciences.

[Can you give a brief description of what you did from graduation up until now?]

Well, first of all I was really interested in being a Clinical Psychologist. So, I went and worked in an assistant Clinical Psychologist position in a school for children with challenging behaviours and autism. Umm that didn't go as well as I'd expected. So, I then moved on and decided that research was more suitable for me. So, I moved on working in the NHS looking at the qualities of Clinical Psychologists and how to get them onto the training course and what makes a good Clinical Psychologist. I was involved in a three year project doing that, which was extended, and during that I became really interested in how psychology affects health. So, I started doing a part-time masters in Health Psychology at Staffordshire University. Umm, so then after four years of the NHS job, I then moved over to a research associate position at Coventry University, in their health services research centre. And at this point I was really starting to think if I really wanted to go into research, and do my own research I would need a PHD, umm which I had always avoided doing even though I was sort of advised to do one straight after my undergraduate. So, I thought OK I am going to have to come back and do that, and I want it to be more related to health. And I was advised to come and look at the sport and exercise department in Birmingham, because they did the sort of psychology I was interested in and that is where I did my PHD. And then got a job umm while I was doing the PHD as a post-doctoral fellow, and then kind of got an independent fellowship and then it kind of went uphill from there.

[Can you give a brief description of the course you studied and how it benefited you?]

I did the Psychology BSC degree, and umm I was really interested in this degree because I had done Psychology at a-level and had found that not only was it interesting, but I was actually good at it. So, therefore that's why I applied to do Psychology, and Birmingham seemed really interesting because they had a whole range of types of Psychology; all the way through from cognitive to clinical Psychology, which I was particularly interested in. Umm and it just gives you so many different skills, so you learn statistics which sounds like it will be dull, but actually comes into place in lots of different jobs. Umm you learn how to manage and run a research project, you get lots of experience of doing oral presentations and written skills and, it's just a very broad based degree that's suitable for lots of different positions. But, then particularly because I was obviously interested in Psychology it lead in nicely to what I do now.

[What would be the range of typical starting salaries and potential for progression within your career?]

Gosh, umm when I started as an assistant psychologist, I think I was earning about £10,000, which was apparently even lower than some graduate jobs that were perhaps ten years before; so, (laughs) it can be quite a range. If you want to be a professional psychologist, you have to have quite a low salary for quite a long time and get used to that, particularly if you are going to go back into education and do a master or a PHD. Umm, it's after that it starts improving. Umm nowadays I think if you want to be an academic, and get a lectureship they start from around 27,000, for if you're being someone's research fellow and it's more if you're being a lecturer.

[Would you say you have used any of the transferable skills that you developed within your undergraduate course later on in life?]

Definitely the statistics; if I hadn't had training in statistics at Birmingham during my degree, I wouldn't have been able to get into that first research job, the apt I then got at Coventry and I really think it helped me have a good strong basis in statistics for starting my PHD. And, that's kind of stayed with me for life; I'm now one of the people that other students and staff go to for stats advice in our department. And I think doing that as part of your Psychology basic degree, you know is one of the reasons it really does help you have an in-depth understanding. And I think that's one of the skills that Psychology students don't always realise it's a really valuable thing to have. Umm, and then a basic understanding of how the brain works and then all the different systems it communicates with, obviously then opened me up to then starting to look at some of those systems: how the brain affects the cardiovascular system, how it affects the immune system and how your emotions can actually influence your health. So I think generally, some of the specific skills like stats but also the general grounding in the brain and its communication with the body was really important.

[What were your reasons for pursuing a career in your chosen field?]

It gradually dawned on me that a career in academia might be something I was good at, and also enjoy. I think one of the reasons is that I really wanted to use my brain, and I'd pursued work experience through a few other careers like occupational therapy, I'd looked at physiotherapy; umm I'd done both of those areas. And although it was really interesting, I just don't know it wasn't analytical enough for me. Umm I just didn't want to be working with patients day in day out; I wanted to be working on my own as well. So, academia seemed the perfect job because you're getting to interact with people through your lectures and your teaching, but you're also getting to do research; some of which is in a group or with your own students, some of which is on your own. And, it's a really varied job and I think I like that flexibility, it suits me.

[What activities did you undertake at university to enhance your chances to get into your chosen career?]

I made sure I did voluntary work, so in my second and third years I got a volunteer position for one afternoon a week, in a mental health service for people with bipolar disorder. So, I was shadowing a Clinical Psychologist and also helping out in some of the group therapy work and also doing basic admin tasks that you'd have to do in that role; but it really gave me an insight into how clinical Psychology services work. Umm and I also did some work shadowing in other careers I was interested in, just to see which direction I wanted to go in, I was also interested in physiotherapy at the time. Umm, I also helped out at my local church with things like youth club activities, so that I had a whole range of different youth club activities going on. And, I was a member of a couple of societies as well, so had a social life too.

[With hindsight would you have done anything differently?]

Probably not, because at the time I did want to be a Clinical Psychologist and if you want to get the training for that and get on the course for that you do need to have some experience. And, if you want to get the highly competitive assistant jobs, again you need some experience so I think I went about it in the right way. I tried to get experience just by volunteering, umm and that was really helpful. I guess maybe I could have done more research into other possible careers and maybe looked more closely at what would happen if I'd have done a PHD, but at the time it just wasn't the right time for me to do that. But, I would always say the more research you do into the variety of careers; the better it is to really give yourself an idea of what the options are.

[Could you describe the typical day in the life of an academic?]

I think one of the things about having an academic job is that there is no typical day, but basically it usually involves: wrestling with an awful lot of emails, trying to get through those and trying to prioritise like mad the things that really need doing now. And the key aspects of the job are obviously: lecturing and taking care of your students – whether that's your personal tutees or your project students, a lot of that involves setting up meetings and umm doing training, and then the other aspect is trying to do your own research, help PHD students run their projects, supervise other projects that you've got grant funding to run or that you might have post-doctoral research fellows running. So, it's quite a ... yeah a typical day is really varied, I guess it also involves lots of different meetings for sort of administration, you need to be involved in your school and what's going on there and what decisions are being made. And, often you get involved in lots of different committees across the university, umm so for example: I might be at a meeting for university task 21, or I used to be on the college research and knowledge transfer committee, so lots of research you get involved in a whole variety of things. Sometimes, you have to do interviews for the media, umm a lot of public engagement opportunities as well. So, sometimes you're trying to put your science across not to academics by writing journal articles, but you're also trying to write press releases as well.

[Can you outline your likes and dislikes about your job?]

What I like about my job is the variety because it keeps me awake and alert, and interested. And the flexibility as well, because occasionally when you're being bombarded by people knocking at your office door and emailing you; you can work at home and try and get through something – like writing that grant application or writing that journal paper. Umm things I don't like about this job umm... I guess at the moment trying to fit all my different tasks into the time that I actually physically have available and that would be healthy for me to work. It's not a nine to five job, perhaps it used to be years ago; but it certainly isn't now. Umm and it is a real challenge to sort of cope with the pressure and try and get everything done, and learn when to say no; which I'm still learning.

[What are your aspirations for the future?]

I would like to be a professor of my current research area, and I would like that to be sooner rather than later. Umm, but at the same time I don't want to rush it too much because I think that you know, you do need to get a certain level of experience of supervising projects and students, and teaching before you get to that level, umm but that's where I hopefully headed in the long run.

[Do you have any words of wisdom, or advice for anyone looking to get into this type of career?]

I would say that if you want to become an academic you have got to be comfortable in quite a lot of different roles. You can't just be the sort of person who just wants to work on their own in an office all the time, but you've got to be happy with doing that sometimes; because sometime you will be writing papers. Umm, you've also got to be organised not every academics organised, but if you are it makes life a lot easier, because you're trying to juggle all those different tasks: you might be trying to run a conference one week, and then organise meetings with five different PHD students with five different projects, the next week. You just need to have a bit of a grip on time management, and like what you're doing; don't go into it for the money because it's not that kind of job, but enjoy it and try and make the most of opportunities.

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