

Chapter 10: Choosing the Game You Want to Play

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Scientists are interesting vessels of atypical experiences and character trait combinations gravitating towards very specific questions. The desire to understand fuels sleepless nights and lifelong dances with uncertainty. It leads to labyrinthine question journeys through different countries and cultures. Scientists often have to bid farewell to their original families, and grow their own along the way, with curiosity and perseverance as their steadfast companions.

It actually does not take anything special to be a scientist; children are naturals at it. Adult scientists have simply received some type of formal training. They have learned how to twist and turn things in order to observe them from as many angles as possible. And they have acquired and cultivated a language and structure to facilitate communicating their observations.

Being an academic, however, is an entirely different game. The rules of academia are unwritten, hard to explain, and in perpetual flux. Players are constantly moving on and between complex boards, which vary across countries, institutions, labs, and time. Much like any legacy game, with every new move these boards can change. Sometimes it is unclear if you are playing a single-player game, who your teammates and opponents are, and if your next move will nullify your current plan.

Despite — or perhaps because of — having played this game for over 15 years (mostly without knowing it), writing this chapter is a challenge. I do not consider myself creative, and wonder: Who — if anyone — will read it? How will it feel to reread these lines myself, at some point in

the future, when I am no longer a non-tenured professor wondering what's next? At the least, this text is a bird's-eye, retrospective snapshot account, deliberately redacted to leave room for the imagination.

Navigating Unseen Barriers: The Role of Mentorship

I entered academia because it offers a world that thrives on questioning everything, where nothing is (mis)taken for black and white. While living comfortably in grey areas has fed my curiosity, it has also led me to question my own instincts. Environments that cultivate healthy skepticism attract great thinkers and generous educators, but also individuals who exploit others' uncertainty or are insecure themselves. Throughout my career I have experienced both. Universities, institutes, departments, and their organizational structures can empower or stifle you. Their processes and individual people can support or hinder the pursuit of your research, professional growth, and mental well-being.

Six years ago, funded by a Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) PRIMA grant, the first cohort of the most talented female scientists in Switzerland embarked on their journey of setting up and heading their own research groups. Since then, we have learned a great deal. Aside from some truly remarkable scientific and professional achievements, many of us were subject to discrimination, harassment, and power games — in which some of “us” were even complicit.

Looking Back, What Would I Advise Myself?

Trust your sense of right and wrong and do not let others gaslight you into accepting a broken culture. Seek out information on what others are experiencing: Are PhD students expected to “sink or swim”? Is there any indication of power games (defamation, isolation, rival camps), nepotism, or favoritism? Are non-professors regarded as *valuable* (maximally benefiting senior colleagues interested in maintaining the status quo), or are they *valued* and supported in their own right? Are your superiors

and colleagues gatekeepers or victims of the idea of maintaining the “hierarchy” through “process” (i.e., micromanagement)? I believe that good leaders will trust you and want you to grow; they will give you the freedom to develop and fail, and will support you when this is what you need.

Personally, I have learned that individual efforts can change neither cultures nor collective and individual wrongdoings. I have come to understand this through the incorporation of mentorship into my life. Unlike family and friends who cannot relate to the world of academia, mentors provide invaluable guidance and expand your horizons through their networks. I strongly advise early-career researchers, especially first-generation academics, to seek mentorship from a tribe of supporters. Finally, if you find yourself in an environment that does not serve you, remember that you have the freedom and resources to seek one that aligns with your beliefs and values. After all, people and institutions are temporary fixtures; their and your actions are what remain memorable.

The Complexity of Independence in Uncharted Territory

Entering academia often feels like stepping into a world of infinite possibilities. This freedom can be liberating at times and isolating at others. I experienced this profoundly when I moved countries for my PhD and later started my own research group. With no familiar support and the great weight of (solely) self-imposed expectations, I found myself navigating periods of loneliness. This was not just due to being physically removed from family and friends. I was collecting responsibilities, experiences, and perspectives to which they could not relate, which increased the distance between my old and new world.

Starting my own research group, I found myself shielding my team from issues that were unrelated to their work but could affect it. The isolation I experienced as a new principal investigator (PI) still feels like the loneliest period of my life. Looking back, I understand that becoming a PI meant that for the first time I had the opportunity to independently *create my own collective*. Previously, I had only ever joined and adapted to groups that others had created. So, if you find yourself feeling lonely, rec-

ognize this as your chance to build your own community. Identify peers you trust and respect and create the tribe you want others to experience.

The Interplay Between Discipline and Creativity

Whether in the intricacies of the brain, the nuanced choreography of cooking, or the precision and artistry of ballet, I have always been intrigued by how discipline and creativity can blend to produce exceptional results. Professional cooking and dance mirror key lessons for science. They all require solid scientific and technical foundations acquired only through discipline, diligence, and commitment. When skills so firmly consolidated that their execution seems effortless meet dynamically changing environments, something exciting and exceptional can emerge. Collectively, the different paths that artists and scientists take, how they advance their expertise across the individual pieces of work they have developed, and how they persevere in the face of challenges highlight some things I believe are critical for excellence. When their passion (obsession) and skill have room to breathe in an environment that nurtures their energy and creativity, magic can happen. Try and find that place for yourself.

Curiosity Trumps Inherited Knowledge

Professional journeys are highly varied, but our minds are primed to pick up on patterns, especially when encountering uncharted territory. While I always felt like a bit of an outlier in my field of work, with no knowledge of the unwritten rules and conventions of science and academia, curiosity kept me going. Looking back, I realize that the professional advice we receive should mostly be taken with a grain of salt. For instance, more senior (predominantly white male) colleagues would try to instill the idea that becoming a very specialized expert in some technique or method, that finding your one niche or brand, is the recipe for academic success. In the best case, this was well-meant advice based on their own

experience. In the worst case, they realized that this approach was obsolete, but proffered their wisdom nugget nonetheless. Fortunately, my curiosity also prevented me from going down that route. I was more interested in questions that would require different tools to be answered. I think this kept me navigating near the boundaries of fields, and in turn seeking out and creating opportunities to cross them.

On Facing Apparent Failures

Success requires discipline, which means showing up and persisting after a setback. In the beginning of my studies, I applied for a fellowship to study in the US and was rejected. I was utterly devastated, but later realized that my inexperience in applying for things was likely a significant factor. Towards the end of my master's studies, I met my future PhD advisor. Under his guidance, I applied for two PhD grants around the same time. While the first was rejected, the second was not only accepted, but ranked highest among all applicants.

With hindsight, these early experiences normalized the process of being rejected in academia. Rather than dwelling on the whys of a rejection, I identified what I could learn from it and moved on. I remember enjoying writing these projects with my supervisor. There was no formality or hierarchy involved; the process was purely goal-oriented. His experience and mentorship undoubtedly helped me improve, but I also learned that experience was not the only factor at play. Although I think I have always been very gritty and resilient, my experiences have helped me perceive setbacks not as failures but rather as crucial waypoints on my path.

Embracing Constraints

Constraints can either stifle your creativity or serve as an opportunity for innovation, depending on how you respond to them. In my experience restrictions — such as limited access to costly equipment, or time

required to develop and gather data — make for better science and scientists. Constraints lead to more investment in and appreciation of the process, and at least for me, less attachment to the result. Constraints increase the likelihood of exploration of non-conventional means, which are needed to create links between things that might at the surface seem to be unconnected.

The continued duality between constraint and freedom has shaped my professional life. It has helped me create a space to bring together and work with colleagues from vastly different domains, united by common interests and dedication to their craft. Today, I work with empirical scientists, legal experts, policymakers, artists, and philosophers, who share the view that true learning and progress happens when the connections between seemingly different fields are strengthened and elevated. I hope I'll still be dancing this dance when I reread these lines.

“Grace is the beauty of form under the influence of freedom.”

— Friedrich Schiller