

Chapter 12: Take Good Care

Sara Hellmüller

Dear young scientist,

I want to write this letter to you to give you hope: academia is a wonderful place. You can choose the topics that interest you the most; you are up for a lifelong learning journey; you are free to structure your days quite flexibly; and you can work with people who are as convinced as you about the value of science. Yes, academia is a wonderful place. But it is also a harsh place to make a career. You are likely to have to live for quite a while with the precarity of time-bound contracts, you never really have the satisfaction of an empty “to-do” list, your intellectual performance is being judged continuously, and it is not easy to fully disconnect, as our main activity — *thinking* — is never done. To make the wonderful aspects prevail over the anxiety that the downsides may create, I want to share with you some principles that have guided me as I navigated my way through the universe of academia.

Construct Your Own Specific Profile

A few years back, I met a young professor. I was impressed by how fast she had secured a tenured position and asked her for advice. “It is simple,” she said, “you have to know what you stand for.” She was right: you must find your niche! This means creating a core profile for yourself. While much also depends on the opportunities you get, and not everything can be planned, it is important for you to know what you are most passionate about and to make that the center around which you build the

other aspects of your profile. It may not be easy initially, but your core passion will crystallize with time. In my case, it was the topic of *peace* and how various actors perceive and promote it. I then constructed my theoretical, methodological, and empirical focus around this core passion. Everything beyond the core can then also be strategic to make you recruitable for professorships, as long as it is still compatible with your main passion. For instance, I linked the topic of peace, which is usually covered by the niche discipline of peace research, to broader international relations and political science theories. I continuously extended my methodological skills to work on the topic of peace from different angles, and I generated a diverse range of empirical material on the topic of peace, ranging from first-hand accounts of people living in conflict contexts to an extensive database on peace missions. Your core and its surroundings may be different — maybe you will become known for a specific method, empirical approach, or area of expertise — but you need to know what you burn and stand for.

Be Kind and Generous

Academia is a harsh place and some people seem to think that the tougher they are, the more authority they gain. It is a highly competitive environment, as many more people are pursuing academic careers than there are tenured positions available. Much has changed in recent years, but bullying, offending, and degrading still happens. We need to jointly transform that. Yes, maybe we will not all make it exactly to where we initially wanted to arrive, but envying and obstructing each other will not bring us to the top. Maybe being nice will not do that either, but at least we will have been generous on whatever paths we will end up pursuing. There is no argument against kindness. So, my advice would be: share that proposal you have written, give constructive advice, speak positively about colleagues, and support even your seemingly direct competitors. Don't get me wrong: it does not mean that you do not put your interests first, as in the end you are surely ambitious and want to succeed. Nor does it mean not warning others about people who

exhibit toxic behaviors because you think this may be badmouthing. But wherever possible, try lifting up others on the path you are pursuing, as you surely do not want to reach “the top” and find yourself without any friends there.

Contribute to Leveling the Playing Field

Not everyone has the same chances of making an academic career, and access to knowledge production in many fields is still highly unequal. For instance, the scholarly research on one of the topics I am researching – international peace mediation – is still produced mostly by male authors at Western universities.¹ We are all tied up in our busy daily lives of publishing, teaching, attending conferences, leading our teams, and fulfilling institutional responsibilities. However, we also all have a collective responsibility to make academia a space where careers are determined more by merit and professionalism than by access and privilege. Making sure to cite relevant authors from underrepresented geographical regions, genders, and social groups in your publications and syllabi of the courses you teach is one thing. Recruiting diverse teams, engaging in true partnerships beyond your own geographical bubble, and actively contributing to more inclusive institutional policies is another. I have experienced it as a good practice to regularly check in with myself whether my activities are contributing to leveling the playing field. So, I ask myself: Do I schedule meetings, organize conferences, set deadlines, and communicate with my team in a way that takes into account different religious holidays, care responsibilities, and other aspects that may influence people’s professional availabilities? Am I sufficiently aware of my own cultural or other biases when recruiting new team members, inviting guest speakers, setting up conference panels, or contacting authors for a special issue? Do I speak out in case of inequalities and problematic practices by others? All these questions feed into my overall vision

1 Sara Hellmüller, “Knowledge Production on Mediation: Practice-Oriented, but Not Practice-Relevant?” *International Affairs* 99, no. 5 (2023): 1847–66.

of more diversity in academia: an environment where it becomes less a matter of including some persons and groups into the existing structures of others and more about changing these structures to enable exchanges of different persons, groups, structures, and institutions in a leveled playing field.

Be Realistic and Set Priorities

Over the years, I have learned to be realistic in terms of what I can expect from myself. But this was not always the case. When becoming a mother, I felt very strongly about proving that having a family and an academic career were not mutually exclusive — and making a point to broader society about that. And yes, parenthood and academic careers are by no means mutually exclusive, but it is far from easy. In my case, I initially tried to be the super-mom and super-academic at the same time. I only slowly learned that I cannot (and should not) compare myself to the academics without the same care responsibilities or the parents without the same job responsibilities. I was constantly falling behind my expectations in both aspects of my life, and left with a feeling of “not being enough” in either of them. Besides the fact that comparisons are not useful, I have now learned to set my own priorities. I cannot (and do not want to) spend hours in the kitchen cooking elaborate meals every evening and I may not be able to attend all the academic conferences I would like, but that is alright. As a friend told me just before I had kids: “Don’t fool yourself, you will not be as productive as before, but you will be productive in different ways.” It is true. We indeed must be realistic about how many hours a day has. I am convinced that we can have both a happy and healthy family and a fulfilling career if we learn to be realistic and do not pursue flawed ideals! And we are often the hardest judges with ourselves. So, let’s face it: combining parenthood (or other care responsibilities) and academia is pretty tough, but not impossible if we are kind and patient with ourselves. This is all the more important because we do not want to convey to younger generations the image of perfec-

tionism when it is pretty hard to reconcile all the different responsibilities we may have, including self-care.

Know Your Non-Negotiables

In the day-to-day balancing of different priorities, what helped me most not to lose myself was knowing my “non-negotiables.” They are, of course, different for everyone. For me, I have two main non-negotiables: First, I want to be there for my son if he needs me. This does not mean that I stay at home whenever he complains about going to school or has a little cough (he would notice pretty fast how to pull that trick). But it means that if he is emotionally or physically unwell, I cancel a meeting, instead of sending him to daycare or asking someone else to take care of him. Children grow up fast, their inner life is richer than the universe, and parents have a unique responsibility to accompany them on their way to becoming strong individuals as well as respectful members of society. We should not take that light-handedly, and we should respect when we or others fully embrace care roles. I therefore also openly communicate about it, so that it becomes more acceptable for working parents to be there for their kids when they need them. A second non-negotiable for me is that I want to stay in Switzerland, even if there may be better job opportunities abroad. While I have always been the one in my family who was seemingly predestined to go live abroad due to my extensive travels, now almost nothing would bring me away from my hometown. This is where my family and friends are and where every corner of the city is filled with profound memories that render it immeasurably beautiful. My happiness and mental health are closely tied to having such strong roots in a place I call home, and I would not give it up even for the best job in the world. Why is knowing your non-negotiables important? It is important because it means that you will not regret the compromises you make to respect them — in fact, they do not even seem like compromises. Did I miss an important meeting? Yes, but I solidified my relationship with my son, who knows that he can count on me. Did I miss an interesting job opportunity because it was

not within commuting distance from my hometown? Yes, but I have a deep sense of belonging instead.

Relativize

It saddens me when I see how many people are struggling in academia. The postdoctoral phase between your PhD and a tenure-track position is especially daunting. For many people, this is a period of deep anxiety and worry. This is why you need other pillars in your life to relativize academic priorities. Don't put all the emotional eggs in the professional basket. Spend quality time with your family and friends, go for a run, contemplate the fall colors on the trees, smell the perfume of the spring flowers, hike in the mountains, or do whatever helps you relax. Important life events with your family or friends are not to be missed. These moments do not come back. And these events, along with the smaller moments that make up our daily lives, help you put the hardship of academia into relation and experience the feeling of appreciation for what you have. A career may be fulfilling, but it may not procure that deep sense of happiness, serenity, and gratefulness that human relations and connecting with nature can.

Have a Plan B

Academia has a strong element of unpredictability. Of course, it is not fun not to know whether “one will make it” in academia, and we are all somehow striving towards this one professorship as the seeming coronation of our career. But I would like to suggest a change of perspective. A wise colleague of mine once said: “If you reach your target, you miss everything else.” This is why it is important to have a plan B. I have always had one, namely becoming an elementary school teacher. I know that it would not be the end of the world if I do not make it as a university professor, because I can also be happy if I fail. This does not mean that I did not pursue my plan A with all the perseverance and commitment needed,

but it takes away a lot of pressure to have a viable alternative. This is particularly important because not everything is under our control. While an excellent CV is needed to get a professorship, it is no guarantee. As with everything in life, we also need luck: the right position at the right time, the right fit in the department that hires, the right people who support us, the right methodological or theoretical approach. So, you can do everything “right” and still not get a position. Given this final bit of luck that we all need, there is no guaranteed pathway towards a professorship. So not having a plan B would be like playing the lottery while giving up all other sources of income.

Know What Works for You

No job in the world is worth putting your own mental and physical health at risk or missing important moments in the lives of your close ones. There is no recipe for how to balance work and life. Some people may need a clear separation between the time they work and the time they are off; for others this would cause more stress. So, it is important to know what works for you and to find your routine. For me, I know I can concentrate best in the mornings. So, I try to do most of the heavy brain work then and leave the later afternoons for other tasks. I also do not mind catching up with some tasks or writing emails outside of office hours (but I delay delivery), if it gives me more liberty to structure my week. You may not be a morning person, or you may need a clear-cut end time in the evening to sleep peacefully. And your own routines may change if other aspects of your life change (such as having children). All is fine and everyone works differently. The important thing is that you find out what works for you (and your family). And adapt if needed.

Be Proud and Celebrate Successes

Be proud of what you have already achieved and celebrate successes. I remember distinctly being convinced that I would never get the grant

before I received it; being convinced that I would never get the position before I got it; being convinced that I would never have an academic career before I had one. And I am sure you know the feeling that once you have achieved something, you downplay how difficult it was to get there and thereby also expose yourself to fundamental doubts: “Yes, my paper was published, but maybe the reviewers were just nice”; “Yes, I got this position, but maybe they just wanted me for other reasons than my academic credentials”; “Yes, I received the grant, but maybe I was just lucky and the competition was weak this year.” No! You achieved all of this because you worked hard for it and because you deserve it. Be proud and celebrate successes.

So, my dear young scientist, all will be fine. But you need to take care of yourself.