

**gillian sebestyen forrester** **view from the top**

# So, how do I return to my career?

As a child, I was fascinated by the idea of extra sensory perception and would spend hours trying to invoke an 'out of body experience', read other people's thoughts or move objects with my mind. This later grew into a desire to understand the brain, at both the behavioural and neural level.

After my degree in cognitive science at the University of California San Diego in the mid 1990s, I came to England to study human visual attention in Anna Nobre's brain and cognition laboratory in Oxford. I submitted my PhD in early 1999, and successfully completed my viva a few months later—when I was three-months pregnant with my first child.

Like many first-time mothers, I planned to have a career break. But, after nearly three years at home, I was ready to return to work part-time. At that point, I had no idea how difficult it would be to raise a family and continue with my academic ambitions.

The field of neuroscience moves very quickly and I had not established myself in the field before my break. After a string of failed post-doc interviews, I began to realise that I had no hope of being offered a job when the competition could pledge 60 hours a week, or more, to it.

Instead, I took a job as a part-time Research Assistant at the Centre for Brain and Cognitive Development at Birkbeck College in London where I assisted with ongoing projects to do with normal and abnormal cognitive development in infants. It was during this time that my internal PhD examiner told me about the Daphne Jackson Trust Fellowship and the Royal Society's Dorothy Hodgkin Fellowship, which support researchers who want to return to their careers.

While the Dorothy Hodgkin Fellowship offered an attractive work package, with the option of part-time and flexible hours, it was not only for part-timers. So, I was still in direct competition with people who could pledge their lives entirely to their jobs. The Daphne Jackson Trust, however, turned out to be a unique scheme specifically for individuals requiring flexibility in their work schedule because of family obligations.

So, could I have it all—a family and a successful academic career? I won a three-year, half-time Daphne Jackson Fellowship in the spring of 2004 (funded by the Gatsby Foundation Charitable Foundation) based on a research programme that focused around the investigation of ape cognition. This was a disparate field for me, but the Daphne Jackson Trust offered a re-training scheme that allowed me to fill in the gaps. I took up my

fellowship at the University of Sussex under supervisors who had both trained in primate behaviour.

My fellowship experience was both eventful and successful: I had a second child (without taking time out); developed a new methodological tool for investigating animal behaviour; published my first single-authored manuscript in the *Journal of Animal Behaviour*; participated in numerous media events, including a BBC documentary, to promote the public understanding of science and to educate the public on conservation issues; and have landed several part-time positions.

I am not going to pretend that working in academia has been easy since completing my fellowship. That would be a lie. The competition for lectureships is fierce, and thanks to RAE ratings, success relies heavily on the number of publications you have.

Funding bodies make it particularly difficult for part-time employees. I cannot begin to tell you how many grants I have applied for, only to be informed that I cannot be the principle investigator of my own research programme because I do not hold a full-time academic post. Under these absurd circumstances of 'needing a job to get a job', I persuade colleagues to act as my PI so that I can be their research assistant to carry out my own work.

The need for flexible working hours to care for two young children and the desire to conduct my own programme of research—rather than join an existing lab—continue to be a major obstacles in my goal to become an established member of the scientific community. Today, I manage by cobbling together bits and pieces that will keep me employed and employable until both my children are school-aged and I can work full time.

So, I am a lecturer in cognitive psychology at the Open University, a visiting research fellow and associate tutor at Sussex university's psychology department and a research assistant at Birkbeck College, where I'm conducting a study using my newly developed method for investigating communicative behaviour. The pay does not come close to that of a permanent post, but I am passionate about my research and know that this is just a step along the path.

However difficult I am finding the current employment atmosphere, I know that I would not be conducting my own research today had it not been for the 'platform for progress' that was so generously provided by the Daphne Jackson Trust. I hope that in the days to come, when I can begin a full-time post, a university will take a chance to employ a driven academic with teaching experience and a well-defined emerging research scheme who has not taken the traditional route through academic progression.

*More to say? Email [comment@ResearchResearch.com](mailto:comment@ResearchResearch.com)*