

## How to find your academic self – and keep it healthy

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Finding the ‘right’ field and topic to specialize in, establishing yourself as a valuable and visible part of a research community, successfully presenting and disseminating your research in the form of talks and publications, advocating for yourself in front of committees to secure grants or paid positions, having to relocate your entire life if such a position happens to be in a different city or country, juggling between your research and other academic duties (such as teaching or administrative tasks), finding the right balance as well as boundaries between your personal and professional life, fighting impostor syndrome, facing the fear of ‘failing’ by having to leave academia, ... – the systemic and personal challenges of going into (and even more: staying in) academia are obviously many, even more so in an insecure (post-)pandemic, post-truth landscape shaped by AI, and they create a competitive high-pressure environment that, especially if not dealt with early enough, can negatively affect the mental and, in turn, physical health of academics. It is thus sadly unsurprising that in a *Nature* survey with responses from 6,300 early-career researchers, more than one-third of respondents claimed they have sought help for anxiety or depression caused by their PhD studies (Woolston 2019).

This talk addresses these ‘external’ and seemingly uncontrollable issues by shifting to an internal perspective, focusing on something that we can influence: ourselves, specifically our self-conception and self-presentation as academics. Instead of asking what we want to be working on or where we see ourselves in five, ten, ... years, I want to highlight the question of who we want to be as academics – now and in the future. This involves, on the one hand, (1) explicating useful and largely implicit maxims (or even mantras) such as ‘decide what is important to you and be true to it’, ‘compare yourself with yourself rather than with others’, and ‘redefine yourself as often as you need to’ (Sternberg 2017), and, on the other, (2) shedding facets of performative and ‘false’ academic selves (Berliner 2017) that we have built up by critically reflecting on ourselves and academia and practicing (self-)care, incompleteness, honesty, irony, and, crucially, self-preservation. Both will be presented with ample examples.

The goal of this talk is not to deny the responsibility of academia as an often toxic system in desperate need of change but to highlight ways of reclaiming agency in the face of increasing insecurity by raising awareness of reflexive practices that allow for a more self-determined view of one’s own academic trajectory. In the belief that there is universality to be found in every individual story, the talk includes experiences from my personal academic trajectory and invites the audience to reflect on their own academic personas, experiences, and attitudes.

### References

- Berliner, David (2017): How to get rid of your academic false self? <https://doi.org/10.58079/nh72>
- Sternberg, Robert J. (2017): *101 ½: the unspoken rules for success in academia*, 2nd edn. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Woolston, Chris (2019): PhDs: the tortuous truth. *Nature* 575: 403–406.