"There Are Many Reasons That People Succeed in Academia"

Jamie L. Hanson

Abstract In our interview with Jamie Hanson, he tells us how he progressed from graduate school to a tenure-track faculty position and some of the challenges he encountered along the way. Jamie highlights that academic positions involve many responsibilities beyond research and teaching, something many PhD students may not realize. Of particular importance, many academic positions involve a shift from focusing on doing the research yourself to being in a more mentorship role. Jamie also shares some insights from considering positions at several universities and considering what might be best as a family, especially in light of a two-body problem. Academia requires a high degree of resilience to rejection, but there are still many paths to success.

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Chris: Can you introduce yourself and tell me a bit about your current position?

Jamie: I am currently in my mid-30s and a father to a high-energy toddler, and I live in Pittsburgh. I love dancing and often describe myself as a "music nerd"; however, both of those things were more central to my identity pre-parenthood and pre-COVID. I am an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Pittsburgh and a research scientist at the Learning, Research & Development Center also at the University of Pittsburgh. If we are getting in the "academic weeds," my position is "hard money," and I teach ~3 classes a year. My department is reasonably sized, with ~40 tenure-stream faculty and a number of admin positions, and in a school of arts and sciences at my university. Psychology is one of the more popular majors, so we serve a few thousand students at Pitt, including both majors and non-majors.

What was the focus of your PhD?

To introduce a theme that will likely pervade lots of my answers, I tend to live and focus in multiple different worlds. I was dual-mentored by one supervisor who specialized in neuroimaging and one who specialized in developmental psychology; both broadly worked in affective neuroscience. My actual PhD was in a "make your major" program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. It might be more fun to say "choose your own adventure." Though it was really called an "individual graduate major" or IGM. This program is rather unique, but basically I selected a small committee of faculty to guide me through graduate school. I consulted with them on specific classes to take, what qualifying or "prelim," exams would be, etc. My committee consisted of my PhD mentors and two faculty members who conducted research in nonhuman animals, specifically rhesus macaques. I also had a good bit of informal mentorship from a psychoneuroendocrinologist who was originally a

postdoc in one of my labs, a biostatistician specializing in technical neuroimaging analysis, and a health economist studying the impacts of poverty. As such, I often describe my degree program as one "that integrated developmental psychology, the neuroscience of emotion, public policy, and biostatistics." I think that's mostly accurate given all the other things I wrote here. I was in graduate school for a *long* time. I started in 2005, finishing up my degree right at the end of 2013, and I think I technically "officially" graduated in 2014.

As you were finishing your PhD, what were you thinking about your career plans?

I will be honest and say I am a bit of an "odd duck"; by the time I got to graduate school, my major career goal was "to be a professor." Now being a professor, I can say that I didn't actually know all the things that "being a professor" entailed. I, however, know that this was the right decision for me and, as a first year PhD, that I wasn't completely off-base with longer-term plans. Of note, again being an "odd duck," I went into college being a declared psychology major, taking as many classes as I could. A good random example of this, as a senior in college, I remember meeting with Dr. Robert Rescorla. Rescorla was an incredibly important figure in psychology and a pioneer in the study of learning; however, we met and I said I *just* wanted to take more and more psychology classes. He suggested I diversify and take a photography class or something in anthropology. I didn't listen to his advice.

Can you tell us a bit about your journey from finishing your PhD to where you are now?

Like most, the journey was filled with lots of ups and downs. Before finishing my PhD, I had a reasonable bit of success with research. I had 10+ published or in-press articles before my dissertation. This opened up a number of doors for me, and I was lucky enough to basically be recruited for a postdoc at Duke University; multiple labs pooled in funds, flew me down to North Carolina, and I interviewed with each one. I started with the incredibly supportive Dr. Ahmad Hariri, funded by a training grant out of the Center for Developmental Science at UNC-Chapel Hill. Working with Ahmad was great, but after the first year of my postdoc, the training grant didn't get renewed. Ahmad basically met with me and said: "I'm supporting you and another postdoc, and that other postdoc is more closely aligned with my grants. You should start thinking about finding other funding." I was stressed out and had to basically go around to different labs, some of which I didn't choose when I first interviewed at Duke, to find new funding support. That eventually worked itself out, and I was able to have a joint/split postdoc with Dr. Hariri and Dr. Kenneth Dodge.

Dr. Dodge was a developmental psychologist, completing some really seminal work in the 1980s and 1990s. He then moved toward larger public-policy foci, so it was a different approach and style from when I started at Duke.

With that crisis averted, I put my head down and kept trying to be productive on my postdoc. I submitted a few more papers and then hit the job market. I was again very fortunate to land a few interviews—I think maybe seven? However, it should be noted that I applied for ~30 jobs. It was then fairly grueling 6 months of visits and interviews. Of note, my partner was also an academic, actually on a tenure-track at that time. So my professional life and personal life were deeply fused at that time. She would tell me about her professional challenges, I would talk about a job I was applying for or a department that I was interviewing with, etc. There was little to no "space" and time for us to just be a couple. We both really hated the whole process. I would get excited about a job; she would have mixed feelings about that city or university. She would get excited, and then I wouldn't get an interview. We really tried to operate collaboratively and as a team. It was some of the best advice I have gotten about solving "two-body problems"—basically, make sure everyone is pretty happy with the decisions. If someone goes in with some hesitation or potential resentment, it will only grow and grow. Marriages and partnerships can basically be poisoned by that stress and those negative feelings. Eventually, again through lots of tears and tough conversations, we decided to leave North Carolina and go to Pittsburgh. My partner was sad to leave her university, but we thought it was the best decision for our family. Things mostly worked out. My partner ended up having a visiting professor job for a few years, but it was kind of a terrible match for her; that was really sad and frustrating. She liked academia but had some hesitation about all the facets of academia.

So I kept plugging away as an assistant professor. I had graduate students and undergraduates join my lab, my family had a baby early on while we were in Pittsburgh, and we have tried to survive all the different challenges thrown at us (getting papers and grants rejected, the pandemic, etc.).

From interviewing at different places, did you get an indication of how they differed? Apart from the two-body problem, what are some factors that an applicant might want to consider when deciding where might be a better fit?

Sort of. Nearly every place said they "valued collaboration," "appreciated interdisciplinary work," and "didn't want to be siloed." However, it was clear that in a few places, that was more just "talk." When places struggled to answer questions about faculty working across multiple areas in a department or outside of a department, that was an easy tell. I really, really value interdisciplinary work—my PhD in an individual graduate program that I designed, which was "area agnostic"—so I was happy to land where I did.

In terms of other pieces to consider, there are a few in-the-weeds things that are useful, if folks are considering multiple places. First, are there internal grants potentially available for junior faculty or more novel (high-risk) projects? For example, the research center I work in has a very generous internal grants program, as does the broader University of Pittsburgh. I think thus far, I have received about $200K in internal grants. The applicant pool is much smaller than an external grant review, so it is a major advantage. Second, when does the tenure count "start"? A few colleagues are at institutions (e.g., UC Davis) that count "everything post PhD" in terms of publications, grants, etc. My institution does not really do this. Third, does that department "actually tenure" people? That sounds a bit silly, but some departments are notoriously tough to receive tenure in and to rise up the academic hierarchy.

Finally, and really most important of all—if you are thinking about an academic job and have the luxury—consider the actual place you are living. Might it be a good place for someone to live? To relocate to? To raise a family? To buy a house? Basically, where you might want to spend 30 years, as that happens with many academic jobs, you go to a department and stay for a long time. A good example of this, of a colleague and university that I will not name—someone I knew who did their PhD in a major cosmopolitan city and their first job was in a very small town where a major research university was. While you sometimes can't control where positions are, etc., I personally couldn't see moving to a very small town where I don't think I could be happy or to a department where tenure is not very likely and a person is likely to move again in ~6 years when tenure doesn't happen. My colleague actually was very productive and would have received tenure but moved because I don't think the town was a reasonable, long-term location. *But* all that is to say—consider the psychological side of things—do department and the cities/towns they are nested in seem like a place you want to spend a few decades. That's kind of a tough question—like agreeing to marry someone after one date—but it is a reasonable analog. So do some fact findings and ask around; ask colleagues and professional friends for experiences and details of those surroundings.

Do you think that someone who just finished a PhD might not realize that some aspects of being a professor and running a research lab are parts of the job?

The first thing that really jumps to mind is *service*. I always thought professors just research and teach. If you were good at those two things, awesome*; but* there's this third major thing that dominates lots of your time, aka "service." This includes being on student committees, having faculty meetings, serving on a search committee for new faculty members, etc. Don't get me wrong—I love many of those tasks and elements, but you invest a ton of time in all of that service. There are days where I don't get much research done because I'm running from one service-related meeting to another, and then I have to answer urgent student emails, etc.

The other thing I would say is that every department is different and it's hard to define "success." Few if any departments will say you need "X" number of papers to receive tenure. And every department will conceptualize and count publications and other research accomplishments in different ways. Some universities will say "Oh you published 40+ articles; that's great!" Others will say "Oh you published a good bit, but most of them were with your old mentors and supervisors. It would be great if you published more independently." The lack of clarity can be stressful, as one always wonders "Am I doing enough? Is my position 'safe'?". Those things are really specific, but it's wild to be worrying about hitting some benchmarks, instead of just "doing science".

Can you tell us a bit about what day-to-day life is like in your current position?

My day-to-day schedule is reasonably flexible but often gets packed with meetings. There's a reasonable amount of "service" to my department or research center, and this is much more I think than folks realize. In a typical week, I would say there's 2–5 h of area group meetings, center meetings, student defenses, etc. This is all on top of the other meetings I have to support my graduate students and staff. You add in teaching there, my lab's meeting, and fairly quickly my open time evaporates. Most have likely said this before, but the amount of time I have to "actually do science" and not just write grants to do science gets *real* low, real quick. As a good professional friend, Jamil (Zaki), said once, "Imagine being an amazing college basketball player, and then all of sudden, you are transported to the NBA … but as a coach." I participate in lots of meetings and plannings about science but don't execute as much science as I did as a graduate student or postdoc.

What do you like most about your work?

One broad answer—the flexibility. I love that I have choice in the exact hours I work, which is especially nice and useful as I have a toddler at home. It is helpful when she is sick or childcare is unreliable to be able to focus on critical personal and family issues when needed. I also deeply appreciate the flexibility in what I research. Some weeks I get incredibly excited about a new method or idea, and I feel so lucky to have the freedom—"OK, let me figure out how to implement X or to focus on Y…." I really can drive what I am thinking about and reading. That feels unlike most any type of job outside of academia and research.

What do you like least about your work?

The meetings!? That's a semi-joke, but there is a reasonable amount of "service" related to being a professor—being on this committee or meeting about this issue. It takes a good bit of my time, almost every week. Sometimes, the meetings and topics are interesting and important, other times as the joke goes "it could have been an email…."

If someone was interested in pursuing a similar career path, what would you suggest they do to better prepare themselves?

I've said this before in different social media spaces and conference panels, but I think it is very true—PREPARE FOR REJECTION. This job is built on negative feedback, critiques, and reviews. Develop a thick skin and get ready to be resilient; get ready to fight for the science and work you think is important.

I think a lot about the advice that people give and sometimes the challenges I have had with mentors. One of my favorite people in academia is Dr. Andrea Hussong at UNC-Chapel Hill. Andrea has an uncanny knack to think and look outside of herself and her experiences, to truly connect with mentees, and to think about multiple "points" (or frames) of advice. In my experiences, many mentors often give advice and guidance from *their* vantage point, what worked well for them—basically their "N of 1" experiences. That makes sense but can be hard, especially as a new trainee. Perhaps you don't want to (*or can't!*) follow a mentor's path, so getting advice related to that isn't always the most useful. Related to this, I remember I had a mentor who always pushed me to do science very similar to their work. I, however, knew that wasn't my strength, that wasn't how I was going to make an impact; that mentor was very kind, but it initially frustrated me. I felt like I was doing science wrong and was of lesser value. It took me a bit to realize the science was just of a "different" value. The work they did and the approach they employed were useful, but so was mine. This felt like one of those "N of 1" moments. But it is important to think that, inside and outside academia, success comes through many paths—some straightforward, some roundabout, etc.

Based on your journey, what advice or suggestions do you want to pass on to someone who's currently finishing their PhD?

I guess my best advice is to think about your "end points," but be mindful of the realities of different situations. For example, graduate school is a good choice for many folks but isn't for everyone. It is an amazing space to learn and grow; a

colleague once called it the "worst paid, but also most intellectually interesting, startup." You can pursue some amazingly interesting, new ideas, but, if you are going to graduate school, purely to "be a professor", I would suggest thinking some more. The number of academic jobs is *really* low and likely going to be even lower post-COVID (at least for a few years). You can, however, get amazing jobs in industry or other places that often pay well and allow for better work/life balance. Post PhD, getting one of those types of jobs is definitely a "win" in my opinion.

Other than that, I would say figure out how to deal with failure and setbacks because there will be *lots* of them!

Is there anything else you'd like to tell someone reading this interview?

This is an odd way to close things out, but assessing myself in the start of graduate school, I wasn't the smartest in my cohort by a long shot. There were so many capable and talented people I was studying with. I feel like I have been successful, thus far, and a great deal of that feels due to luck and "non-cognitive"/soft skills (e.g., persistence, dealing with failure, strategy).

I think this is a great point—not to say you're not smart, but rather that soft skills are very relevant for success. Can you tell us more about your thoughts on this?

I feel like there are many reasons that people succeed in academia—some people are just brilliant (Karl Deisseroth and Danielle Bassett types). Maybe you're brilliant too? But if not, there's not much you can do; other people are good at positioning their work, "selling it" a bit, and being hard and smart workers. They "grind it out" by leveraging all the other elements of their personality and skills. This includes folks who are diligent and persistent and can robustly deal with failure; it also includes really amazing managers/supervisors/mentors. And this isn't to say that the brilliant folks aren't good managers. These elements, which aren't exactly about "pure g"/intellect, are major drivers of success. Last thing is about being an interesting, or maybe even "fun," collaborator. I feel lucky—I've worked with some incredibly smart people, who were amazing writers, thinkers, etc.; however, some were more difficult to deal with than others. Being a scientist that someone "wants to work with" is also important. Science nowadays is a team sport. If someone is difficult to be around, it often leads to them being less in demand to work with.

Thank you for sharing your experiences, Jamie! It was great to hear about your path and insights.