

ALBA-IBRO Diversity Podcast - From Postdoc to PI

Episode 1 - Facing fears by building communities

Transcript

Mayank Chugh | 00:00.160

If we can actually make that happen, then there is, of course, this entire box of setting up a lab or your own research group, you know, negotiating a salary, you know, negotiating a startup, having access to people within that institution or not or elsewhere, the instruments that you want, how to negotiate with them to sell it for cheaper prices, how to get your first postdoc, or should I even hire a first postdoc or should I start with graduate students? That can... overwhelm you all of a sudden.

Jonathan Weitzman | 00:34.621

You dream of being the next group leader but feel overwhelmed by the challenges ahead. Then we've got just what you need.

Renaud Pourpre | 00:41.383

What if you could learn from scientists all over the world? What if you could listen to them as a guide to what comes next?

Jonathan Weitzman | 00:48.885

You've come to the right place. I'm Jonathan Weitzman.

Renaud Pourpre | 00:52.106

And I'm Renaud Poulpe.

Jonathan Weitzman | 00:53.586

And you're listening to the Alba Ibro Diversity Podcast.

Renaud Pourpre | 00:57.828

Turn up the volume and let's dive into running your own lab.

Jonathan Weitzman | 01:15.593

When you're a young scientist starting your first postdoc, there's a lot of things going on in your head. There are so many possibilities that it can be exciting but also paralyzing. Embarking on an academic career and aspiring to be a team leader is a bit like embarking on an expedition to discover unexplored corners of the planet or even the universe. We're suddenly the captain of a ship. At first, we're the only crew member, but soon there'll be other people joining us. And the fact that the ship is growing isn't the scariest part. The hardest part of embarking on this new adventure is from the moment we leave dry land. We have to make difficult choices almost every day. Do you remember what that felt like, Renaud? Yes.

Renaud Pourpre | 02:03.790

When I finished my PhD, I was terrified. Terrified of the idea that the next step in my life would probably determine all the others. I was afraid of going in the wrong direction. I was terrified that I wouldn't be enough to succeed on this path. It was a fear and uncertainty that

consumed me even six months before the end. of that first step. Faced with this paralysis, only one thing occurred to me. I had to find a guide to expose my fears and uncertainties and get sound advice from other scientists. And at the end, the solution was right in front of me. My solution was to find someone who would listen to me and share with me. And that person was Jonathan.

Jonathan Weitzman | 02:50.988

That sounds like a big responsibility but taking the ship. metaphor. I always say there are lots of different ships. You start off in a small kayak and then move to a yacht and eventually maybe to a big cruise ship. And sometimes you need someone to help you on the transition from dry land to floating out at sea. So you might get it from a mentor, but if you don't, together with Alba and the support of Ibro, we've created this podcast to just help you. by creating a guide to navigate the murky waters of your own journey into academia. It's going to be hard to cover everything, but we promise to dig as deep as we can into the various challenges from postdoc to managing your first lab.

Renaud Pourpre | 03:41.473

So if you're experiencing this fear and anxiety too, why not start there? Imagining building your career and your first lab is like looking at the Everest and telling yourself you're going to climb it. But like everyone who prepares to climb it, you may wonder if you're the only one so scared to imagine a future that is so uncertain.

Jonathan Weitzman | 04:03.362

So to help you embarking on that ship or climbing that mountain, we've brought together a series of guests and experts. We'll be listening to their advice. What were they afraid of? What were their first challenges? What advice do they have? And what should we be aware of?

Renaud Pourpre | 04:20.127

And if this episode focuses on uncertainties, don't be afraid to stay until the end, because even if certain challenges seem to be beyond us, we will also look at solutions that are within our reach. So are you ready to leave the harbour?

Ashley M Bourke | 04:43.366

So I guess it's a fear of mine as I'm entering the next stage of trying to balance this, you know, confidence. With just the reality of that, especially during this transition from postdoc to PI, it's unsettling. It can be really stressful, and you might not really know what you're doing.

Jonathan Weitzman | 05:03.510

This is Ashley Burke, a neuroscientist postdoc in Erin Schumann's lab in Germany. She got her PhD in 2020 at the University of Colorado Denver Medical Campus in the United States. Ashley shared her thoughts about taking steps beyond the postdoc. And like many postdocs, the next step in her career is somewhat uncertain, and she's far from alone. While this stage in a scientist's career can be destabilizing, it also reveals other life challenges.

Mayank Chugh | 05:31.757

You have to think about... If you have a family, then it is a two-body problem. It is not a one-body problem. And academia, it is hard to get one faculty position and then you have to worry about the second so that you have the other moving part moving. So that also creates a level of complexity in that job search and even accepting or not accepting that position.

Renaud Pourpre | 05:52.608

This is Mayang Chouk, an assistant professor in biology and gender, sexuality, and women's studies at the College of William and Mary. at Williamsburg in Virginia, United States.

Deciding where to develop your research is one challenge, but knowing what scientific question to tackle is another. And it's something you will be confronted with even during your first postdoc. We asked Florencia Fernandez-Chape, an Argentinian postdoc currently working in the biology department at Boston University USA, to explain it further.

Florencia Fernandez-Chiappe | 06:27.429

And then, like, you know... I think also I changed subjects pretty much. So I was working in sleep. So neuroscience is the broad theme I'm still working at. But I changed from, you know, sleep to sensory biology. I had to learn so many things. And I was so comfortable in my PhD just because I was doing it for five years. And I was also an undergrad in that lab. So I built all this knowledge and all this confidence in my field. And now switching to a postdoc, you have to learn faster. You have more tools for sure. But you also have to learn faster, and you have to become an expert faster because you have to write all these grants. You have to apply to all these fellowships, and you get interviewed, for instance. Right. So I got interviewed on my project before I started the project because I applied to a fellowship and the deadline was right before I joined. So I was supposed to give a presentation on something that I wasn't working on. And I was finishing writing my thesis. So it was like the whole thing. Right. It's like that for me was a big challenge.

Jonathan Weitzman | 07:22.084

And so you get the idea. The more scientists we talk to about. career transitions from PhD to postdoc or from postdoc to group leader, the more we realize that what makes these transitions complicated are the large number of choices, where to work, who to work with, what to focus your lab on. All these choices can make the transitions destabilize. And this has probably got worse since the pandemic, where people ask themselves a lot of questions about their careers, about those choices, and about career transitions. So what we can see is that postdocs who are preparing to move on to the next stage in their career, they're asking themselves a lot of questions. There are a lot of choices to make. When is the right time to leap? Where should I go? What should I work on? And how do I even know whether I'm good enough? And then there are a lot of very practical considerations like salaries and funding that come into the equation.

Florencia Fernandez-Chiappe | 08:19.867

Of course, and I think it's important to mention it. I think postdocs worldwide are very poorly paid. Like we're very well-prepared professionals, like 30-year-olds are not being paid as much. I know that it doesn't come from a lab. It's like the structure of science and how it was built also in like probably a society, like the part of the society that didn't need that much money. So like the fact that first-gen people are coming to science now and wanting to, you know, build their economic structure, it's like it's becoming a topic more and more. Like I'm talking to all my colleagues and we're all... acknowledging that we're not being very well

paid. We devote our entire lives to this. We move across the world for this. So that I think it's also a big challenge. Like, you know, and like a lot of people are questioning their motivation because of this, because money is necessary.

Ashley M Bourke | 09:07.653

You know, is shaping my decision to stay in academia or maybe transition out of academia and maybe go into industry or something else entirely. And that's because from what I do understand and what I do know about... For instance, becoming a professor in Germany and also, you know, in the UK. Pay is not so great to my understanding. The cost of living is really high. And I'm not at all money motivated. I mean, I think I would have left for industry after my PhD if that was the case. But I do want a comfortable life. And comfortable meaning that I'm not going to be... a professor and having to maybe worry about or even consider maybe living with somebody to save money, to save rent. You know, I need to be able to afford some things on my own.

Renaud Pourpre | 10:02.144

So this is no small issue. Salaries and lifestyle choices are important factors in career decision making. And scientists are encouraged to move around internationally. But as Mayeng explained, mobility is not easy for everyone. And at this moment, he introduced us what he calls citizen privilege.

Mayank Chugh | 10:22.381

What I mean by citizenship privilege is other forms of privilege I think we cannot see. or understand the experiences of people who have access and opportunity while others not, right? So if you have access and opportunity, it is hard to understand the experiences of people who do not. But the problem what I'm asking about or where the privilege comes is that it is dependent on the passport you carry based on which country you're born into. An American passport or a German passport or a Spanish passport would allow you to access or visit other countries that you're not familiar with. without having to go through or tedious visa paperwork. Imagine you have to attend a conference, say maybe the end of January or, you know, next week. If you have a passport that allows you to simply hop on a flight and come to the US, you really can't afford that. But a scholar or a postdoc from most of the countries in Africa, most of the country in South America, most of the countries in Asia cannot do so. They need at least... at least six months and sometimes even more than one year to know where they are going and have an exorbitant amount of detail from their personal life about their finances. They sometimes have to show the tickets back and forth and provide an evidence that they will return back to their country. I mean, so that's not fair.

Jonathan Weitzman | 11:53.145

Mobility certainly has its challenges. And when you think about it, it can go. way beyond simple mobility problems. It also raises questions about financial support and equal access to funding.

Mayank Chugh | 12:07.410

I mean, I can speak for myself that when I was applying for funding opportunities as a postdoc, I was very, very limited because I'm not a US citizen and neither I did a PhD here. I had a PhD in Europe and I moved to the US. So my funding opportunities were limited. I could... It only applied to philanthropic organizations. And those organizations are rather

prestigious and far more competitive. So in the end of the day, I am competing with amazing ideas. People also who come from these extraordinary labs with extraordinary publication record, you know, I can't compete at all. So it basically sets me down. I just feel like I didn't belong in that loop.

Renaud Pourpre | 12:58.788

The financial aspect of being a researcher is inseparable from the quality of life and work. Furthermore, when you're thinking of becoming a team leader, you're not just thinking about your own career, right? You're also thinking about the scientists with whom you want to build this adventure and who have confidence in you.

Mayank Chugh | 13:18.233

I think one of the scariest things for me was personally being responsible for other people's career. That was daunting to me. And it's not an undergraduate institution where you come in for one semester or maybe one year. As a graduate student, you would have probably like for three to four years minimum. And that could be postdocs as well. But their careers rely upon you. And that is a lot of pressure.

Jonathan Weitzman | 13:43.317

Yeah, that sounds like a lot of pressure indeed. Florencia and others echoed these concerns and shared their thoughts about how important management might be in academic teams.

Florencia Fernandez-Chiappe | 13:54.763

People need some... understand that this is to make their lab better, the people that work for them better. And I think, I mean, what I'm seeing, they're working with a very new PI. My PI is in tenure track. She's so aware of all these things. And I think it's because her postdoc experience was so close to her PI experience. She understands all these things. And when I joined the lab, we have a lab compacting, which she like. like, you know, detailed everything she's expecting from every people in like every stage. And we have service every year of how the labs work. They're anonymous, so you're allowed to say anything and you can actually go to her and like, you know, tell her whatever's going on in the lab. And she's very good at it. And she's training herself at that. Like she's, you know, listening to all these audio books about how to manage a lab or like a group of people. And I think that's admirable because she... has so many things to do. As a young PI, she's writing all these grants, she's managing a lab, she's like, you know, doing all these things. And she also understands how this is like, you know, one of the most important parts of the lab, that people are... Happy because everybody works better. If you're happy in the lab, if you're being well managed, if you work in an environment that's enriching to you too. And just not like, you know, dragging all the energy out of your body and like, you know, you're not allowed to do anything else because you're only working in the lab and like, you know, the paper needs to come out.

Ashley M Bourke | 15:19.930

In addition to the technical aspects, the grant applications, the research plan, we really need to be thinking about, okay, how are we going to resolve interpersonal conflict in the lab? setting? How are we going to deal with maybe a problematic individual? We can gain insight because we don't receive formal training on, you know, lab management, lab leadership that we can ask then our peers and people who have, you know, recently gone through similar experiences. I think along with it, though, would be, of course, training, you know, on

diversity, equity, inclusion, and at least in the U.S. right now, don't think that'll get much support. I mean, I think as professors, as group leaders, you're a jack of all trades. You're expected to be basically like a bookkeeper, an accountant. You know, you're ordering all these lab supplies. You're also like a professional writer. You are probably making all of your own figures in Illustrator. You're also a graphic designer. You also have to be sort of not like a therapist, but you're guiding, you're mentoring. You have to be there for your people. And you're a mediator. You're resolving any sort of conflict that comes up. Yeah, there's so many hats, right? There is some training, of course, as we're postdocs and we're sort of, you know, if we get those experiences and those opportunities to supervise other people, we get kind of glimpses of this, but it's nowhere near at the scale that I think we would benefit from if, you know, we had some sort of training.

Jonathan Weitzman | 16:50.156

So clearly there are many responsibilities as you build your lab and recruit your members to join you on your ship. It really helps to get some training in management and leadership. But there are also other aspects to consider when building a lab culture.

Ashley M Bourke | 17:05.848

Having discussions with my mentor. Goal is to submit my paper this year. So I'm really excited about my project and what I think I've discovered. And, you know, up until a couple of weeks ago, the plan was always to come back to the U.S. so that I could be closer to family. I really, really care about diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility. I felt like having compared my experience here, which has been great, I've been an equal opportunity officer at my institute, but then with my experience in the U.S. during my PhD, I just felt that I could perhaps contribute a little bit more to uplifting underrepresented groups in science in the U.S. versus here in Germany. This was my perception. And I knew that I wanted to incorporate DEI work, DEI principles in the running of my lab. But now with what is happening in the U.S., I'm not only confused and uncertain, but I'm actually quite scared. So I'm very outspoken as an advocate. I've published on gender equity, also on my experience with being diagnosed with narcolepsy during my PhD. If I were to go back to the U.S. and set up my lab, will I be able to do everything that I want to do in terms of really creating this equitable and accessible space? But could I even be a target? You know, this is something that's just in the back of my mind.

Renaud Pourpre | 18:46.515

Equity and inclusivity are in the balance in the careers of scientists. And after all, shouldn't the laboratory reflect what science is all about? An international collaboration, regardless of gender, origin, or taste. On this point, our guests recommend democratizing transparency from inside the institutions themselves.

Ashley M Bourke | 19:08.913

For example, applying to tenure-track positions in the U.S., you need to submit a diversity statement, which I'm incredibly grateful for, and I think it's incredibly important. You can go on to several websites of professors in the U.S. generally they have even their diversity statement included in there. They have even symbols or icons reflecting that they support, let's say, for example, LGBTQIA plus individuals, things like this. So I did feel initially that it was more of a conversation in science, you know, diversity, equity, and inclusion. Yeah, that

maybe it was kind of viewed as, you know, a little bit more important than how it's viewed here.

Jonathan Weitzman | 19:57.209

But what if transparency on what's important for you isn't explicit in the lab? Florencia recommends having that simple, direct conversations, which can clear up misunderstanding. and maintain transparency.

Florencia Fernandez-Chiappe | 20:11.593

Yeah, I got lucky, but I also looked for many of these things when I was searching for a postdoc. When you're interviewing in a postdoc lab, ask questions. Ask your possibly future PI if they're okay with you going to conferences because you're a postdoc. And in a conference is where you meet the people that are going to help your future, right? It's like you're networking, you're meeting people, and these are the people that are going to be important moving forward. If you don't get to go to a conference, your entire postdoc, even if you have a nature paper, it's going to be difficult. It's going to be way more difficult because you don't meet your community. You don't know what people are doing around you, which is also a problem. And then people get scooped. But just because you didn't go to a conference, you didn't see the posters and where they were going, right? And this is only an example. Like, you know, you can ask all these questions that you're curious about.

Renaud Pourpre | 20:59.669

If there is one thing our guests really wanted to emphasize, it's the fact that in this adventure, you're not alone. And you don't have to be lonely. One of the secrets to managing these transitions is using the power of community. So what practical tips can we glean from this discussion with our guests?

Jonathan Weitzman | 21:19.475

Ashley stressed the importance of having a mentor to advise her through these transitions.

Ashley M Bourke | 21:24.577

I'm really, really grateful that Aaron, my mentor, had spoken with a group leader that had joined the MPI for brain research a couple of years back. So shortly after, I joined as a postdoc and she had asked Alison Barker if she would mentor me. And we get together for coffee about every other week.

Renaud Pourpre | 21:46.160

Next, Florencia stresses the need to build a community by networking around you.

Florencia Fernandez-Chiappe | 21:52.083

My advice is never be isolated. Talk to people, talk to the people around you, not only in the lab, like outside of your lab too. And you could know how having a bad experience was, having a good experience was. We used to share our like... very bad results in the lab. We had like a kind of a seminar in which people were only allowed to say how this project failed and how they could improve it, like get all this feedback. So that's like building a community of colleagues and meeting people that just got into postdocs so they've been through this experience.

Jonathan Weitzman | 22:20.939

And finally, MyYank completes with the importance of building community as a group effort.

Mayank Chugh | 22:26.623

I think to me postdoc association are synonymous with community. Postdocs are very specific career stage where we do not have any cohort mechanism. We don't start the program with five other people, you know, at the same time. So if you start in a cohort, unlike bachelors and masters, you know, which it happens there, you can relate to each other experience. You're new in one place. You figure things out together. You already have friendships in place building up. But for postdocs, none of that exists, right? So we have to... on top of all the things science and science related, we have to build in community in a new space, which is very hard. So you have basically lost your footing. And I think post-negotiation is essentially a group of postdocs that come together to essentially form their sense of community, not to simply share their ups and downs of postdoc journey, but also forming a perpetual network of people. So senior postdocs who have transitioned out into faculty paths, right? Maybe you can talk about that. reaching out to them and having advice, what they had to say if they were thinking of pursuing academic path or asking what their proposal was, if asking if they would want to sit on a Zoom call where they could practice their faculty chalk talk, right? I think that's important. And also, it's still in the network of people or postdocs who ended up not going through academic path, who ended up going to industry. And knowing that we don't have as many resources within the academic sector about non-academic jobs, it is also important to have those in-built network of people, right, who would serve as mentors in those other fields as well. So association is that community of postdocs that can be built anywhere. It doesn't have to be institutionally. I mean, institutions usually house them, but they're usually run by postdocs for postdocs.

Jonathan Weitzman | 24:28.664

As this episode draws to a close, it's pretty clear that the transition from postdoc to team leader is a crucial step and it can be a stressful challenge. This episode has explored the fears and anxieties of this transition. It's also an appetizer for the following episodes, where we will go further into this great adventure towards setting up your own lab.

Renaud Pourpre | 24:50.782

So we'll see you in the next episode, when we'll be tackling one of the most burning issues of all. How to set up a laboratory in a resource-constrained environment.

Jonathan Weitzman | 25:03.071

We're looking forward to delving deeper into the subject. with new guests who will share their stories and advice with us.

Renaud Pourpre | 25:10.430

And we sincerely thank our guests, Ashley, Zorantia, Mayank, for sharing their stories and tips with us.

Jonathan Weitzman | 25:22.318

This podcast was brought to you with the support of the International Brain Research Organization, a founding partner of the ALBA Network. The ALBA Network aims to promote

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