

An interview with Dr Gerry Molloy

Gerry Molloy

University of Galway,
Ireland

Gerry completed his PhD in the School of Psychology at the University of St Andrews in Scotland in 2005. He was then awarded a combined Medical Research Council/Economic and Social Research Council two-year post-doctoral fellowship that he held at the University of Aberdeen.

Following this he worked as a post-doctoral researcher in Epidemiology & Public Health in University College London and a Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Stirling. In 2012 he joined the academic staff in the School of Psychology at the University of Galway where he is now a Professor. He also is the Director of a research group focused on medication use across the lifespan.

EHP: Tell me a little bit about yourself and the job position you are currently in?

GM: Since 2012, I have been based in the School of Psychology at the University of Galway in the West of Ireland. I am a Professor in Psychology and Director of the MEDication across the Lifespan (MEDAL) research group. Between 2015 and 2021, I was the Director of the MSc in Health Psychology and I remain centrally involved in this course. My programme of research focuses on the behavioural science of medication use across the lifespan.

EHP: What is it like being a senior academic in a university?

GM: It is really enjoyable and stimulating to be working as an academic in a University. There is a relentless energy and an optimism, largely driven by the students, that is a privilege to experience on a daily basis. The way that academics work has



changed quite dramatically since March 2020. We are spending more time engaging with others through a screen, which has some advantages, but we are all still adapting to this increase in online interaction. At times, the physical isolation has been quite disorientating. I have missed the quality on-campus interactions with students and colleagues over the last two years, therefore I am looking forward to getting back to more on campus activity over the next year. There can be great diversity in the types of activities you participate in when working as an academic. Teaching and research are obviously the core activities, but there are a whole host of 'contribution activities', such as equality, diversity and inclusion initiatives, which helps keep the role fresh and interesting.

EHP: What are your typical day-to-day tasks? Do they vary much?

GM: In theory it is supposed to be something close to 40% teaching, 40% research and 20% contribution, but this varies considerably from week to week. A typical week during the semester probably does amount to 2 days of teaching related activity, 2 days of research activity and 1 day of

contribution. The teaching tasks are a mix of lectures, tutorials and teaching related assessment and administration. In recent years the research tasks are usually more research project management, review and supervision rather than collecting data, doing analyses and writing papers myself. I was able to do more of this hands-on work earlier in my career. A good deal of research time is now spent reviewing and providing feedback on others' research activity e.g., reviewing drafts of papers, theses, funding applications or other research material.

EHP: What were the main challenges in becoming a senior academic in a university? (i.e., previous training, applying for post-doctoral positions, applying for grants, other responsibilities, etc.)?

GM: At the start of my career when I was at the University of St Andrews in Scotland doing my PhD and later at the University of Aberdeen and then University College London, the main challenge was the precarious nature of the employment and the very limited financial means during this period. The length and duration of contracts and the financial pressures meant that a lot of physical, emotional and intellectual energy was spent on securing the next post, dealing with the practicalities of the relocation drudgery and adapting to the various new contexts that I worked in. While this lasted for the first seven years of my research career, my sense is that it is typical that many early career researchers spend much longer than this in short-term precarious fixed-term contracts. In many countries e.g., US, UK and Ireland, pursuing a senior academic career remains very challenging for those with limited additional financial supports early in their career. This is a significant problem in that there are very few senior academic leaders who originally come from socio-economically deprived communities. Given the critical importance of the social determinants of health, this selection bias against those from socially disadvantaged communities might shape

the science in ways that might not meet the needs of those communities.

Over the last 10 years the biggest challenge has been trying to get the balance right between my academic work, being a parent of three young children and supporting my wife to develop her career. Increasingly it has been difficult to travel to conferences and engage in similar research networking and dissemination. One of the positives of the pandemic, however, has been the acceleration of online and hybrid conferences which have created opportunities to participate in a variety of events that was previously not possible.

EHP: What aspects of this journey have you enjoyed the most?

GM: I have been very fortunate in that everywhere I have worked has been endlessly interesting. Almost every day I see an academic event that I want to attend in some other part of the University or a training course that I want to take. One of the most enjoyable aspects of the academic journey is the constant opportunities to learn new things. The increasing widespread commitment to open scholarship has meant that there is no end to variety of events and training that you can participate in as an academic. I find that being immersed in this strong culture of continuous learning and development is invigorating. At the heart of this is the early career researchers who are often the developers or early adopters of new methods in both teaching and research. In my experience the "more knowledgeable other", to use a developmental term, is more often than not, a junior colleague. Thankfully, I still have quite a lot of interaction with PhD students and post-doctoral researchers who are invariably very willing and able to support the professional development of their "senior colleagues". This is one of the best aspects of the job.

EHP: *Since completing your doctoral training, did you always want to be a lecturer? If so, why?*

GM: I didn't know enough about what was involved in being a lecturer to be confident that was the path for me after my PhD. During my PhD I had limited involvement in lecturing, so it remained a bit of an unknown for me until I had contributed to teaching a bit more during my post-doctoral career. The only alternative that I had considered was to be researcher, but there didn't seem to be many opportunities to get a secure researcher job at post-doctoral level, so after a while it seemed like the most likely scenario was to pursue a lecturing post. Therefore, I started to build a portfolio of experience during my post-doctoral work that enabled me to secure a lectureship e.g., lecturing to different student groups and supervision of undergraduate and post-graduate projects.

EHP: *When you think about your area of expertise and your research, what is the way forward to make even more impact- in the research community as well as in society?*

GM: While it might seem obvious to early career researchers that comprehensive stakeholder engagement is essential throughout the research process to maximise the impact of research both scientifically and socially, this is a more recent realisation for me over the last 10 years. In particular, the continuous engagement with patient and public involvement (PPI) partners in research is essential to maximise impact. Generally, this stakeholder work is carried out with more forethought and as a core element of a programme of research, however there is still scope to significantly improve our methods in this regard. Maximising impact will require that we do more of this stakeholder engagement and do it better.

EHP: *As psychologists in general, what is our impact on society and how can we achieve more impact (More public engagement, more interdisciplinary work)?*

GM: The interdisciplinary work is essential. This requires effective cross-disciplinary communication, which in itself can facilitate better public engagement, because it requires us to translate our science for experts in other disciplines. This initial step of interdisciplinary research often gets us on the path to better public engagement. Psychology is having an increasingly greater impact on society over time and I think that this has been really amplified over the last two years. For example, the Irish prime minister said in a radio interview in 2020 that, "The psychology of a pandemic is as important as the physical presence of the virus", which sounds like a line taken from an introductory health psychology text. This kind of recognition of the value and impact of health psychology is very positive for the field.

EHP: *Regarding Covid 19 and its impact on your research and teaching, what needs to go and what can stay?*

GM: In relation to research, we need to maintain the extent of our excellent public engagement that we achieved during the pandemic, while being careful to avoid straying too far from our area of expertise. When given a public platform to comment on a highly charged topic, it takes a lot of restraint to avoid letting speculation and personal political biases colour our evaluations to a greater degree than reliable evidence, so we need to resist that temptation. When we comment on complex public health problems that have a high degree of uncertainty, a sense of humility might garner more public confidence in our analyses than an over-zealous commitment to one specific over-simplistic solution. As some esteemed EHPS Dutch colleagues once quoted, "Everything should be as simple as possible, but no simpler".

In the domain of teaching we need to add more

value to the on campus experience for students than we have in the past. This will involve re-creating the social conditions for students to meet their fundamental needs for autonomy, competence and connection with others. The pandemic inhibited this to a great degree and we need to re-think how we design our teaching and learning so that students and staff can foster communities within which they can develop and flourish. Some of this will be facilitated by better use of technology, so we should embrace those new tools that have clearly added-value, while also getting back to more traditional forms of face-to-face interaction.

Principles from Universal Design for Learning (UDL) appear to have achieved a renewed level of prominence during the pandemic. In particular, I think that we need to enhance our use of short form video in teaching, learning and assessment and reduce the quantity of assessment that centre on written expression as part of our promotion of UDL. Proficiency in written expression remains a key academic skill, but knowledge and skills in the production of oral and visual content in short form video seems to be an increasingly valuable core communication skill. This could help recognise and reward those students who clearly have excellent oral communication skills, but who might have difficulties with written expression or who find live oral communication challenging. There is a lot of exceptional quality that our current methods of assessment might not identify.



Gerry Molloy

University of Galway, Ireland

gerry.molloy@universityofgalway.ie