

TW for “How to get a paying job in STEM- Dr. Y. Ohene”:

Racism

Exclusion in academia

Microaggressions

Academic Drinking Culture

Pruthvi Mehta 0:00

Hello and welcome to the POCSquared podcast. This week's episode is going to be part of a special series of episodes with one episode a week for the month of August 2020. These episodes are interviews with people of color who hold PhDs in the STEM field, about what it's like to get a paying job in STEM after graduating. This week's guest is Dr. Yolanda Ohene, a physicist specializing in MRI brain research and co founder of the Minorities in Stem network, a UK network promoting Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic individuals working in STEM. In 2019, she won the Jocelyn Bell Burnell medal and prize for the development of a non invasive new MRI technique to measure blood brain barrier permeability and water, something which proved a biomarker for diseases such as Alzheimer's. Please be aware that the episode will contain discussion about racism and exclusion in academia and racist microaggressions as well as academic drinking culture. As usual, the transcripts and show notes for this and all episodes can be found on our website www.POC2.co.uk. That's [www dot POC](http://www.POC2.co.uk), then the number [two.co.uk](http://www.POC2.co.uk). And if you have any comments or questions, we can be found on Twitter and Instagram at POCSquared, that is POC then the word squared, no spaces. You can also contact us by email pocsquared@gmail.com. That's POC and the word squared@gmail.com. With all that said, we hope you enjoy the episode.

Karel Green 1:33

Yeah, okay, good. Nice. So if you could just for the listeners, introduce yourself.

Dr. Yolanda Ohene 1:39

Okay, my name is Yolanda Ohene. And I'm a postdoctoral researcher at UCL and my work is looking at developing MRI techniques to look at processes in the brain.

Karel Green 1:54

So our first question is like what is your current job? So you said you were a postdoc and did you use a lot of the skills you got from your PhD in it?

Dr. Yolanda Ohene 2:03

Yes. So my first... My current job is as a postdoctoral researcher. And so this is actually almost like an extension of my PhD. So, my PhD was in developing MRI techniques to look at the brain and to look at like, mechanisms which may occur in Alzheimer's disease. So, so looking to see whether this technique can be used as perhaps an early diagnostic technique for Alzheimer's. So my current job is a continuation of that

erm to because there are many branches from my PhD, there were many branches of unanswered questions that came out as many people's PhD this happens in and so I'm kind of extending, extending and exploring those branches now.

Karel Green 2:52

Like you said it's an extension of your PhD. So do you get to like, work in same group as your... as you did in your PhD, like with your supervisor or other people who work on it with you?

Dr. Yolanda Ohene 3:04

Yes, so it was... So it was actually my supervisor offered me the postdoc position. And at that time of the final year, it was perhaps about six months before I finished the PhD, because he said, it would be nice to continue this work and so would you like to stay working on it? So it did take me a while to decide actually, because I had initially thought that I would would like to move to a different lab or was quite undecided, in terms of like what I should do for a job. But I came to the conclusion that first of all, it's quite is very, very stressful writing a thesis in order to eliminate the job hunting while writing. So... This is very like this is very open... Sort of like my strategy, erm but yet in order to kind of eliminate that stress, I thought actually this is a good idea to continue. So it was like a postdoc for one year that he offered me.

Karel Green 4:16

Okay.

Pruthvi Mehta 4:17

Okay.

Dr. Yolanda Ohene 4:18

And then what else was I going to say? Yeah, so it kind of just gave me a bit of the breathing space that... That is, I think it's what's the word? It's not necessarily... It's necessary to have the breathing space if you haven't decided what you want to do, I think.

So, you was like I... I can only imagine and it's coming for me, so I'm stressed already, like writing a thesis is but you'd like you mentioned that... Yeah, like you were undecided and if you wanted to move to a different lab or stuff like that, so are you, were you pretty sure at this point, like in your third year of your PhD or whenever that you were going to stay in academia or leave academia and like, moreover, like, what are your thoughts on this idea of leaving and staying in academia?

Um, yeah, so I think I'm, I'm kind of, I'm not a very decisive person just to kind of...

Pruthvi Mehta 5:21

Same, yeah.

Dr. Yolanda Ohene 5:21

I think there's some people who are just like that, and you know, it's quite hard for me to come to a decision. So my kind of thoughts between staying in academia leaving academia, is first like there's a bit of imposter syndrome. And also kind of looking at the prospects of moving through a career trajectory in academia is quite daunting. And so, in that sense, I thought, maybe it's best to actually find a job in industry and or maybe to move to like a startup something like that. But then I reflected and thought that actually, if you want to kind of succeed in many career paths, it's like quite difficult. And so I realized that I actually really do like doing research. And academia offers, like freedom and flexibility that I think other like other careers path or work in other places don't necessarily offer the same as, as in academia. And so that has kind of motivated me to, to stay in academia for the time being, and while... While I can get contracts and hopefully I can get my own funding and that type of thing then I'm actually quite motivated to stay.

Pruthvi Mehta 7:01

That's really that's really, really interesting. I mean, you mentioned imposter syndrome as a bit of a tangent but like, do you think at any stage in academia, whether it's you know, graduate student postdoctoral researcher or like a full blown professor, do you think that there's some level of Imposter Syndrome present at each stage?

Dr. Yolanda Ohene 7:22

Erm from my experience, my experience and also talking to people at different stages of their career, I think that it's always present. Erm I think it's, perhaps it manifests itself in different ways, but I think what's been quite interesting to me is that like sciences as a as a what would you call it? A field? I don't know if that's the word I'm looking for, or being a scientist, if all it kind of leaves yourself open to be like, are you the best? Are you the like first? All of these questions. Erm but actually, that's not really what science is about is it?

Pruthvi Mehta 8:09

No, no.

Dr. Yolanda Ohene 8:10

And so, I think it's like a mental battle to say that like for me, I'm get... I can feel myself getting closer towards you know, actually just back yourself and do the best that you can do and then if you're passionate about something, then you should be able to like map out a career trajectory for yourself. And it doesn't.... like and also I think you just see egos everywhere.

Pruthvi Mehta 8:43

Exactly. Yeah, yeah. Yeah, like that's the whole like, thing and in science, especially, of like the lone genius genius theory where it's like, you know, people who are magically gifted, blessed with talents only bestowed by God Himself... And acquired this sort of knowledge that helps him discover something and you're completely right

like that's not what science is meant to be about, everyone doing stuff together and doing the best they can. That's a really good point you made

Dr. Yolanda Ohene 9:17

Yeah. And even like, I think say at conferences when you see quite senior people, like senior academics like always going to ask, like really Junior question erm academic questions and like, ripping them to shreds, like, that kind of behavior is just so unuseful, you know, like, actually... I like I don't really want to work with people like that. And so and not everyone's like that there's so many kind and like helpful and sort of like have a similar ethos around it. So it's just a matter of like, working with them I suppose.

Pruthvi Mehta 10:02

Exactly. It's just like this, like the dominance of like, I would say like, cis het white guys and in especially in our field like physics, right there's... I've been to so many conferences where the criticism isn't constructive. It's just it just seems really demoralizing and it's like if I was standing up there presenting this to 60+ people. I would I would not be okay being talked to in this way.

Dr. Yolanda Ohene 10:29

Yeah.

Pruthvi Mehta 10:30

Especially yeah. Especially with like a older PhD student, normally gets this kind of flack. Like no one really listens to younger PhD students, who cares about their presentations? When it when they're older PhD students, the amount of flack they get from older, like academics who have been there for a while and the language that they that's used, it's just absolutely, like demoralizing. I'm just like, I don't want this me. It's terrifying to watch.

Yeah, it really is. Erm I haven't like, this is a real tangent and I'm like, but I

Karel Green 11:03

Go ahead, tell us.

Dr. Yolanda Ohene 11:07

I was having a conversation with my friend who has just got like a fellowship in America. She's moved to America for it in, she's actually astrophysics, like, Karel, you're astrophysics right?

Karel Green 11:19

Yeah. Yeah.

Dr. Yolanda Ohene 11:20

And anyway, so we were talking, we were talking about actually conferences just in general. And we were saying, how much do you actually get out of like going to the big conferences and, and then we were speaking and actually like, you get to go to some quite cool places, which is nice but the experience of the conference itself is actually like not overly beneficial for your career oh not... Also, not the career but overly beneficial for yourself and your science compared to maybe like smaller conferences, where you get to talk to people like individually. There's loads of networking opportunities and that kind of thing. And as opposed to like the big ones where you kind of feel a bit overwhelmed, and it's just like a, it's just the big, the big boys club getting together again. And so we were like actually, you know what? I don't know how I don't think it will be actually that detrimental to stop going to so many big conferences, like just generally because it's like if you just come away feeling demoralized then and if it's not improving your your science or improving your science networks, particularly, perhaps it's not... Erm the it's not the be all and end all. I mean, I think that it's really good for actually meeting people and like putting faces to names and that kind of thing. But I think it's... I think it's worth like, just in general thinking about like which aspects of science are making you feel a bit demoralized and that kind of thing.

Pruthvi Mehta 12:59

Exactly exactly. I feel like there's so many big... So there's like, you know, inter experiment conferences that I've been to and also overarching you know, this theory particle physics you're looking at, here's all the people that do it and those ones are huge and because of how specialized everyone's individual software or whatever they're working on for their experiment is, like sitting through all the tools for like, for other you know, people's experiments, for example.

Dr. Yolanda Ohene 13:24

Yeah.

Pruthvi Mehta 13:25

It just like broad. It's so broad and it's so also specialized the same time, that you don't particularly learn anything about it if it was like a lower level talk and that would be interesting, but it's just like, I have no... I never used the software and I never will. Why am I sitting for an hour long talk about it?

Dr. Yolanda Ohene 13:43

Yeah.

Karel Green 13:44

I think this brings up like an interesting point that I really wanted to ask and it's about like, you mentioned networking quite a lot. And I wanted to ask how big a factor that is in getting like we said, like a job in STEM and like meeting people in, like, I guess the field you work in and stuff like that because er me and Pruthvi have... Like the reason we thought this whole idea in the first place is because like when we

started our PhDs, we were just like to get a job, the only jobs I've seen are just random emails from people in... Like my supervisor and people in the building that I work in, and I'm just on like random tangential stuff, stuff that I don't work on things like that, but we've been told in the past to like network and things, but I always found that strange in that like, Is there not like a standardized website or something like that? So I wanted to ask your opinions on like how important networking is in progressing in STEM?

Dr. Yolanda Ohene 14:44

Yeah, I think from like, my kind of limited experience in sort of like the academic path, erm it seems it's kind of important...

Karel Green 14:57

Oh no...

Dr. Yolanda Ohene 15:01

So I mean, but the thing is, it's just, I think you can be like, strategic about it. But like people have said to me, it's like, if you want to, if you know, there's like a person that you want to work with, or who does really interesting, cool research, then it's like, drop them an email like, like, show your interest or like, just kind of say... Reach out in terms of like, Oh I like, I enjoy, like this paper, that kind of thing. Or maybe if you're doing similar research that like just people are more open to random sort of interaction than you would think. Like...

Karel Green 15:50

You wouldn't think that you'd want to, like bother people with another email...

Dr. Yolanda Ohene 15:55

Yeah, exactly. And so it's like, so for me, like for things like papers that are really important for my work. Like I'll email them and say can you just like clarify this thing in the paper? Like, what does this mean? And is it any follow up work that kind of thing. And then actually getting the opportunity to go to smaller events like smaller, like symposiums and like, of just like 100 people or less. And then like making a point to try to like... I've asked them a question in a talk or like, networked with them like directly I think it is a way to like for them to know like to put a face to a name basically. So yeah, I don't know it does. And even like I hear from the people in my lab, who are like much further along, I hear that they are under the impression that actually meeting people in like fellowship applications and that kind of thing. If these senior people happen to be on the boards of things, just like meeting having met them before. And then knowing a little bit like just knowing your face or knowing who you work with, perhaps has a positive effect. I mean, I don't think it like will get you the thing. Definitely. But I think, from what I've heard I'm of the belief that has a positive effect.

Karel Green 17:23

Okay. Fair enough. Yeah. And then, so, again, so I am literally in my first year, I don't know anything about anything. But like,

That's not true, Karel.

No it is true. It's a whole scam. Don't you worry. But no, I was... What I wanted to hear more about, when applying for these different positions, because it says, like you mentioned, getting your own funding, but then you can apply for like, funding in groups are those two separate things?

Dr. Yolanda Ohene 17:57

Actually, like I'm just like, kind of just dipping into this at the moment, and that is like... My plan is to try to get my own funding. So I think like, applying to like the big research councils, I think they'll they'll get... like the funding that they have or the fellowships that they offer, would pay for your salary as well as paying like the research costs as well. Erm so the thing that I'm, I'm less clear about is like, how, so then you can take that to like a particular lab, and then you could be embedded within that lab basically, but be quite independent. But the thing the stage after that is, I suppose getting like a tenured.

Karel Green 18:49

Yeah. Have a job forever.

Dr. Yolanda Ohene 18:52

Yeah, so that's like a few steps down the line. So I think that's just in terms of like a department having roles open, that would be long term, which is another step, but then also I think he could go instead of getting your own... Like, I could also apply for another postdoc for like, some more years. And so that's not like, obviously, it's not permanent, but that would give me some years to play with.

Pruthvi Mehta 19:23

I have a question about like, so like, your opinions on like, postdocs in general about like, the length of the like, postdoctoral, like contract. Like, I mean, I think some of the main concerns I've heard from people, and like, just generally thinking about it is that postdocs are sort of, I mean, you mentioned sort of freedom, and like short term contracts in academia and stuff like that. But is there any way that in your eyes like postdoctoral contract, due to how short they often are, would be sort of like a negative effects or just like any problems regarding that you heard about being touted?

Dr. Yolanda Ohene 20:02

Yeah, I mean, it's obviously not as good as having a, like a long term job.

Karel Green 20:10

Yeah. Yeah.

Dr. Yolanda Ohene 20:11

Like working for a top company that would offer you kind of like that that's like a job for life or you know, kind of at least a little bit more long term than, say, a couple of years. So like, definitely in that aspect of postdoc contracts, it's like, not so good. What else? I'm just thinking about that. I mean, I think it gets a bad rep that it's like, oh, it's like short contracts. And like, yeah, it must be really annoying if you have to get them again and again, but then also, kind of my, my kind of way of looking at it is, is that's what you've applied for, and it gives you the opportunity to move around quite a lot, and get different experiences at different places, that kind of thing. So it's like, I suppose there's, there's probably no change during the postdoc contract thing. Like it's just a matter of like, whether you whether that's for you or not like obviously for some people, they, they would feel like, quite perturbed or like in, like, not very happy about not having a completely stable job. But then for other people, other personalities, that's not so much of a problem. And so for me, like it's not ... It's not... At this stage of my life is not particularly a problem having to have to like think about okay in three years time, or actually for me in like, six months time I need to find something else, but that's what I signed up for. So it doesn't, doesn't it doesn't particularly bother me. It's just like, I know I just have to do that.

Pruthvi Mehta 22:02

Ah I see. I've got a question about the... So how would you how would you like compare, I mean it's hard to do this, but how would you compare the workload and sort of responsibilities of a postdoctoral researcher compared to a PhD student? Like erm and do you think workloads increased a lot? Like how would like how would you rate it?

Dr. Yolanda Ohene 22:24

I think it's just as I think, as a PhD student, you, I kept on thinking or like someone told me once that is like, you're still in training. So it's like, actually, you're still learning kind of thing I mean, we're always learning but like, if you think about it as a training, and so I think you just as a postdoc, you just need to be like, independent. And so I think as a PhD student, you don't have to feel too bad if there's things that you need help with and like, place like yeah, I think and so I think it's just as a move into a postdoc, you just have to be like, kind of take ownership a lot more of your work.

Pruthvi Mehta 23:16

I see I see.

Karel Green 23:17

Yeah.

Dr. Yolanda Ohene 23:18

Or like... I mean, that's a bit. I'm not sure I'm too happy with that phrase. Because like, obviously, you have a lot of... you have complete ownership over your PhD as

well but I think it's like that thing about actually asking for help. I mean, you can ask, oh, I'm going in circles here. I think it's just a little bit more of like, okay, you should be able to do things independently as a postdoc. Whereas like, it's okay if you don't when you're a PhD student that might summarize it a bit more succinctly.

Pruthvi Mehta 23:49

Okay, yeah, I get I get what you mean. Yeah. Do you supervise any students by the way?

Dr. Yolanda Ohene 23:56

Erm no, not at the moment I have... I did have a erm a Master's, I like co supervised a Masters student, like a couple of years ago, and I would be like, interested in doing more of that kind of stuff in the future. But at the moment, I don't have anyone.

Karel Green 24:15

I just wanted to ask a bit more about like, your thoughts on moving around, like I know you said, and I think it's completely, like fair and reasonable that people know what they're applying for when they sign up for a postdoc. I've talked to a... I've met a postdoc before... I've talk to humans, such a weird sentence. They were just like Yeah, I did back a postdoc in Italy, and then another one in France and some in the US and stuff like that. But what are your opinions on like, I hear a lot of people have to like, end up moving to whole different continents. Is that something that's like common in postdocs or are those the people who happen to want to do that like... But...

Dr. Yolanda Ohene 25:00

Yeah...

Karel Green 25:01

People do go international, which I think is interesting.

Dr. Yolanda Ohene 25:04

Yeah, I think there are a lot of postdocs who do move around. And like you do also meet postdocs from different countries who are also from different countries, you know, like it's quite an international career type like definitely. And so I think that, I think, for everyone, I suppose it depends on the motivation, like, I think people often move if they get a really good opportunity from like an excellent research group, then that would be one motivation to move or if you just want to move in a different country, but then I think that you hear like, I heard a lot like, Oh, you have to move and change research groups, to be successful, all that like and get experience and that kind of thing. But then also, I think, it's always very personal like if you find a group that you actually feel really comfortable in. And you're going to excel because of the, because of the environment. And I think that that's a reasonable reason to stay in the same group or to stay in the same institution. So I think my

opinion about it is like to think of your own personal motivations for, like, moving around, and I don't think anything's ever, like a necessity.

Pruthvi Mehta 26:27

I've got a question about just, just like, because I don't really know that much about how shrouded in secrecy, the whole application process to getting a postdoc is like,

Dr. Yolanda Ohene 26:38

Okay.

Pruthvi Mehta 26:39

Like, how did you like, so, I mean, how did you... Basically you said your supervisor gave you like, was like, you know, told you about this position, basically.

Yeah.

Did you so... Was it sort of like an interview process is that involved? Is an interview involved with the department or a how is that work? Or does it vary from place to place?

Karel Green 27:04

Were you considering other positions and then happened to pick the one your supervisor gave you or not?

Dr. Yolanda Ohene 27:09

And I was in quite a fortunate position in that like, yeah, they, they're always they're always advertised online and so you'll be able to, like everyone can access all like, always job offers have to be, I don't know, completely always, I'm not too sure. But like, they have to be advertised externally. So it's like keeping your ear to the ground about when the advert's going out, and that kind of thing. And, and I think so with my other friends looking for postdocs, and getting postdocs as well like, because it was a cohort of us who like, finished our PhDs at a similar time. It is a lot of word of mouth. And I think if you do want to stay in academia then it's just like actually speaking to the people that you want to work with. And so it might not be that they have like a position at the at exactly the time that you want it. But like, kind of planning ahead and putting feelers out so that people know that you're looking and you're interested in postdoc positions, because then they'll come like back to you, basically. And so it is like in whichever field you're in, like, communities... I mean, there are they are very international, but then once you start to know a few, like key people, then, like, I think the word gets back to you. So this is... Yeah, like, this is a very hush hush answer, isn't it? If...

Karel Green 28:51

It's, it's, it's not like the answer is hush, hush. It's like the process.

Pruthvi Mehta 28:58

It's sort of like exposing. It was on like, you know, it's sort of like shedding light on the process, like, you know, which isn't just just isn't known about like,

Dr. Yolanda Ohene 29:05

yeah, yeah,

Karel Green 29:08

It's not like applying to university in UK where you could just go on UCAS and have complete, like, it's just a website that is, is a lot more complex, I think. But...

Dr. Yolanda Ohene 29:19

Yeah, and I think it's like a similar thing as finding a PhD that you're suited to. Because that's also you have to go through quite a few different avenues, don't you, to find a PhD. So it's a similar thing, as well, but it's like, actually, um, and I think, quite a few people recommended to me that it's like the people who you want to work with is quite important. So it's like, someone in my lab who's a postdoc, she was like, I really want to work with this professor and therefore, like, put some feelers out there. And then when there was a position available, she likes sprung on it. So those kinds of things because yeah, So I think it's just keeping your ear to the ground and being open about like what you want.

Karel Green 30:08

Yeah...

Dr. Yolanda Ohene 30:08

If you do want to look, if you're looking for a... If you're looking at something then like, I think people are there usually to help as well.

Karel Green 30:18

I just wanted to have like, one, I guess final, like wrap up question in that like throughout your PhD, right? Is there anything that you thought that ended up being like particularly helpful for you when you decided to, like, not decided... When you had to, like all of us, like, start looking for what you were going to do when you graduated? Because I know you mentioned a lot like, Oh, you've networked quite a bit throughout your PhD and that sort of worked out for you. And you've seen that that's worked out for other people. And yeah, that's a very, very good, very excellent advice and it clearly is because you literally have a job. But yeah, is there anything that you'd say that was or anything you'd say that you shouldn't do throughout your PhD othat you think could be helpful for when you're about to graduate and move on in STEM?

Dr. Yolanda Ohene 31:09

I think probably the most thing to keep in mind is time. That is like, actually, you probably need to be thinking about this like a lot earlier than you actually realize.

And because at the end of your PhD, you get so wrapped up in like trying to finish experiments, starting writing, writing takes forever, and then before you know it, you like, like you've not finished when you thought you would, and now you've not got a job, those, I think that's when I can get like really, really stressful. So I think just just being aware that probably like one year before finishing your PhD, you need to be thinking about what you want to do and positioning yourself so that that stress is maybe eliminated a little bit. I think that's the thing that comes to mind erm from people people who like people who I've spoken to who, who when I was in that position, I was asking people and yeah, they said that you know, like trying to find a job is really stressful. So incorporating that into like, your, like the things that you need to do for it fairly early on is, I think it can't hurt at all.

Pruthvi Mehta 32:21

Just a little thing. Did you... Did you like allow yourself any sort of break between finishing like graduating from PhD and starting a postdoc? Did you have like a holiday or?

Dr. Yolanda Ohene 32:30

Oh, yeah. Oh, that's a good question. Yeah, I think this is something really important. And actually, you've caught me at a good time after that, like that is... So I finished my PhD in October. And then it was really, really tough. I found it like quite the whole process that you have it like it's really it's tough and you don't really realize how tough it is until you come through it, I think. And so I was like, Oh, this is sorry, this is gonna be really long...

Karel Green 33:07

No I wanna hear it.

Dr. Yolanda Ohene 33:10

I was like, I'm gonna finish early. And I'm going to finish in July. And then I'm going to have all of all of the time off until like the end of September, and then I'm going to start the postdoc. That didn't happen, of course, and so I didn't finish until October. So then that meant that like, I had to wait for my advisor, which was in December, and then I was like, oh, I've not had my time off. And then I was like, You know what, like, it doesn't... I had all of these experiments planned and everything and I was like, You know what, I'm just gonna take like, a holiday to Ghana like, it's not worked out. But I have to, and so I just did that in like the beginning of February that I was like, you deserve this and don't do work. Just chill out when you're there. And that was actually really good. And all it's been quite lucky for me that it's been like the like, a bit more time during night. The lockdown has given me a chance to decompress as well. Like I think that is really important, like, number one, plan that it is going to take you like longer than you think. So plan for that because it always does and then give yourself like you have a real break afterwards to decompress.

Karel Green 34:35

Yeah, that's, that's really good advice.

Pruthvi Mehta 34:38

Yeah that's really good advice.

Karel Green 34:40

Yeah, that is why there's two of us so, to get hints. That was a really good question.

Pruthvi Mehta 34:52

And that was it for our guest episode of Dr. Yolanda Ohene. Remember you can follow her on her Twitter [y_ohene](#) and follow her work with Minority STEM on twitter [@minoritystem](#). The POCSquared podcast was written, recorded, edited and posted by the POCSquared team. It will always be available for free in some form. If you wish to support us, please consider becoming a patron on Patreon. Patrons get special perks like having a shout out at the end of the podcast by me are getting episodes a week early. There are other perks and these can be found on our website [www.poc2co.uk](#). That's [www dot POC the number two co.uk](#). Please share the podcast, tweet and email us. Our intro and outro music is called Bliffy Trance by Kevin MacLeod find it [incompetech.com](#) licensed CC BY [creativecommons.org](#). Thanks for listening.