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**Sophie Scott 00:19**

Welcome to what works from UCL PALS with Sophie Scott, and today I'm going to be talking to my colleague, Elizabeth, Liz Wonnacott.

**Liz Wonnacott 00:28**

Hi.

**Sophie Scott 00:29**

Hi, Liz, all we're going to do here is talk to you a bit about sort of how you got into what you study and sort of your journey through science and what interests you and sort of how you organise your life around work and your work around your life. So, first of all, can you tell a bit... Well, where did it all start for you?

**Liz Wonnacott 00:51**

Where did it all start for me? Well, when I was very young, and once I got over wanting to be a fairy princess, I wanted to be an actress and I loved performing and doing that kind of stuff. And then later, it became more about public speaking and I was going to be a barrister, I think at one point and I watched a lot of Rumpole and LA law and things like that. And I was always quite divided in terms of, I liked maths and science, but I also loved reading and literature and things like that. So, it was never clear I was going to be a scientist per se. And then what really got me in, what really started me on the path of thinking about language science, I guess was two things actually. One was studying Latin. So, I studied Latin all through school right up to scholarship level. And I had a completely insane teacher, incredibly old-fashioned teacher, very inspiring. But he taught Latin, I don't know, as he'd learned it, you know, 80 years before, so we chanted. I can still do you half the noun and verb declensions in Latin, right? So, we learned all these noun and verb declensions, and I just loved this. I mean, a lot of people hate this stuff, right? I loved it. I loved... I loved mad things like building sentences in Latin, translating into Latin. And it made me think a lot about language and how it worked. And in particular, long before I knew that people thought about this for a living, I was thinking, this is so bizarre and I'm memorising all this stuff. I'm learning all this stuff, but there must have been some kids growing up who just implicitly picked up on all these patterns and were using it in their own language. And I just found that a really, really fascinating idea. And then... But I didn't know that people studied it. I found that out later, and I guess the other thing that I sometimes reflect on now, kind of somewhat ironically, is actually how bad I was at spelling was something that always kind of frustrated me like hell and got me in trouble all the time. But also, kind of fascinated me like, why? Why do I find this so hard? Because I read voraciously, but I couldn't spell. And yeah, it's just so... And actually, just thinking about it now, one of my sort of earliest memories of sort of thinking about language was doing some kind of test where I had to put in, you know, was it too, as in also or to as in I'm going to the park, and I just couldn't do this, I couldn't work it out. And then I sort of had this realisation that you could actually pronounce them differently. So, to the park can be reduced, whereas you can't with too and I thought, oh gosh, I knew this. My brain knew this, but I didn't. I didn't know this consciously. So, I found that really fascinating. And then what made me actually go and study linguistics was reading Stephen Pinker's book in 94, I think, The Language Instinct. And funnily enough, now, I don't really agree with pretty much anything that's in that book, but it completely changed my life. If I hadn't read book, I was going to go into classics at Cambridge and I read that book and I thought, gosh, people study this for a living. The thing I've always found interesting. And then I went to Edinburgh and I did linguistics and AI as my degree.

**Sophie Scott 04:14**

Oh, interesting. So, I mean, just very, very quickly to pick up on that. I think there would probably be some whole other podcast to do on the random thing that kind of made you realise, oh, you could do this even if you kind of go back to it now and think it's odd that that inspired me so much because all you can see later on is what there is to disagree with, but when it's new to you, and you just go...

**Liz Wonnacott 04:37**

I think that's what's so important. I mean, what for me that book was, was this is something you can study as a science. And that wasn't a new idea, but it was certainly a new idea to me. And by writing that book, he made that extremely accessible. And so, I owe him one for that, I think.

**Sophie Scott 05:01**

And so, what was it like in Edinburgh doing linguistics and AI? Because that sounds quite, I'm struggling to avoid saying the word dry, but was it...?

**Liz Wonnacott 05:09**

Oh, I loved it. I mean, I'm the nerd right so I didn't mind it being dry. I loved... My undergraduate years were definitely for me like a really high point of my life. I was really glad I did the AI, some of it was dry, but it you know, it gave me an insight into how difficult the implementation of language in technology was, for sure. Also, I learned to programme which is the thing I do probably most with most of my time now. I loved linguistics. I mean, what I really, really enjoyed actually thinking back was the almost... It was a four-year degree, but the first two years were linguistics. It was really about learning to describe language, I think. So, learning about phonetics, phonology, syntax, morphology, but this different way of talking about languages, and I loved all of that. I, later in the degree, I started sort of theoretically to wonder about some of what we were learning. So, we were taught in a very generative tradition coming from Chomsky, at least by some of our lecturers. And I began to question some of the assumptions that underpin that and the way that we were kind of analysing language, kind of looking for more and more general generalisations that kind of, you couldn't see on the surface, but that were underlying and I was questioning some of those assumptions. But I was incredibly lucky because I was somewhere where you were encouraged to question assumptions. And yeah, that was massively important. I remember one assignment in Phonology set by Bob Lad who was one of my mentors and, you know, all time sort of heroes in terms of a teacher. We had to analyse some data using all these techniques we'd learned, as deeply as we could, kind of go mad you can, find all these similarities. And then we had to write an essay kind of critiquing the hell out of our own analysis. And I, you know, I loved that, that was probably the favourite thing I did in my degree. But yeah, I think that that was really encouraging us to think, not to accept just what we were told, and that, for me was really important in sort of where I ended up going.

**Sophie Scott 07:31**

Yeah. So, what were you feeling as you were getting towards the end of your degree, what were your sort of thoughts about what you wanted to do next?

**Liz Wonnacott 07:39**

I can't remember exactly when it was, but at some point, in my degree, it became really clear to me I was going to do this pretty much for the rest of my life. When I went in, I was still thinking about maybe law, journalism at one point, something that involved writing or acting still. But somewhere in there, it became clear to me then this is what I'm going to do. And I had a sort of shift in exactly what I'm going to study. So, I think at one point I thought it was definitely going to be linguistics. And then I started taking some more psycholinguistics courses. Actually in AI, I started learning about connectionism. So, I started thinking and realising there was this sort of more statistical approach to thinking about the way we learned language, the way we process language. And thinking about and realising that the way that we generalise was so probabilistic and how it was sort of tied to some probabilistic patterns in our language. And around that time, I was at university Jenny Saffran's paper came out in Science, which seemed to show that infants could track some of these statistical relationships between adjacent syllables, which might underpin something big in terms of the way we learn language.

**Sophie Scott 08:48**

So just to pick up on that, so for people not familiar with this particular aspect of the debate, it was a huge deal that paper wasn't it because the classic kind of generative approach would be the least... At some level, you couldn't be learning this because there's...

**Liz Wonnacott 09:04**

Yeah, I think, I mean there was this sort of idea that, you know, language, that the complexity of language that we have in our heads, the system we use, is just too complex to be learned from the input. And I think around you know, really beginning with Rumpart and McLennan in the 80s, people were starting to say, actually, some quite simple, low level principles can get you quite far and can get you something that looks a lot like learning a rule, but in a probabilistic way. And I think the Saffran work was important in showing that humans can do this. It's not just something models can do. And really small babies can do this. That was really important. And meanwhile, also I was also reading some of the literature in adult processing which was making it very clear that the way you parse language, your expectation as you're reading something you have to say, oh, do I think I'm hearing this kind of structure or this kind of structure, was very much influenced by your exposure and how frequently you've heard those words occurring in those structures. And so all of that, in my mind at that time was kind of coming together and making me feel very excited about a different way of thinking.

**Sophie Scott 10:22**

So, you've got the linguistics and the AI, and you were starting to do the kind of cognitive stuff.

**Liz Wonnacott 10:28**

Yeah, I started to think of myself a cognitive scientist, perhaps, and then I was lucky, I did my third-year project at that time at Edinburgh. So Simon Kirby and Jim Herford at Edinburgh were beginning to do this, were quite far actually in terms of doing it, this computational work where they were thinking about language evolution. So the sort of traditional Chomskian story would be we've got this language faculty that's biological and it has evolved and it's somehow coded in our genome. And what the evolution group at Edinburgh was starting to say and are still saying was that you can also think about languages evolving and adapting to humans. So as, as we learn languages, across generations they change, we know that you can see language change. And that those changes are changing... so something that's more learnable is more likely to survive in a language, something that's easier to process is more likely to survive. So those are kind of evolutionary pressures on language in a different way. So, you know, I then had those influences and I think, yeah, at that point, I was probably a cognitive scientist, rather than a linguist.

**Sophie Scott 11:41**

And you were a cognitive scientist who wanted to do a PhD, I guess.

**Liz Wonnacott 11:44**

Yeah, no, I knew... I knew I wanted to be an academic at that point doing this somehow, and yes, I knew that that meant doing a PhD and...

**Sophie Scott 11:57**

What happened after that? How did you go about finding a PhD?

**Liz Wonnacott 12:02**

How did I go about finding? I talked to my lecturers, to Bob Lad who I mentioned before. He told me I should definitely go to the States. He said PhDs were better in the States. That was his view, I think at that time for what I was interested in, and so I did. I went and investigated a few different places. But I ended up going to Rochester, and working with Alyssa Newport, who was one of the key authors on the statistical learning infant paper that I talked about. And actually also eventually, in my PhD ended up working with Mike Tanenhaus as well, who was the sentence processing person so I actually, in the end, was able to bring together those things that interested me. Yeah, so I think for me, it was clear I wanted to do that. And one thing that I did that I think surprised people was I did take a break between PhD. So in the States, it's kind of a master’s tied into the PhD. It's like a PhD programme. It's five years. And at the end of my undergraduate or in my final year, I didn't want to just jump straight into a PhD, right? I only took a year. But I knew I needed I needed some time. And I didn't want to be applying all through my final year for things and going for interviews and doing the tests you have to do to do a PhD in the States. So I spent a year teaching English, first in London and then I lived in Paris for six months. And actually, I ended up quitting my teaching English job and just worked selling hotel rooms for four months or something. And yeah, that was the only time in my life since I was 18 when I entered university, where I've not been doing this, so I'm really glad I did it.

**Sophie Scott 13:54**

Just quickly, what was it like living in Paris? Was your French already good?

13:57

Oh, I did French A-level. So yeah, that was the other thing. Yeah, I think that the other thing for me was I've always felt very embarrassed about monolingual I am. I actually have just this year started being one of the tutors on a multilingualism course and I almost feel like I should sort of put my... It's like an AA meeting or something and I have something to declare at the beginning of this because every student in the room is bi- or trilingual, you know, but, you know, I can at least say in those six months I was there, I was speaking French and, you know, that was something. And yeah, that was great. I'm really glad I did it.

**Sophie Scott 14:36**

Yeah. That's fantastic. And then you're doing that and were you applying to the US?

**Liz Wonnacott 14:40**

Yes, I was. And so I did a little trip where I went, and I went to Baltimore to visit John Hopkins. I went to UCSD, to Penn. And my then boyfriend, now husband, came with me on this little tour. So we had quite a good time visiting those universities. It wasn't the weather. Rochester is upstate New York and it's very, very cold and snowy in the winter, and humid and not that nice in the summer. I went for the people. So I went because I liked Alyssa's work, really. And I also liked that there was both the sort of statistical learning community and the focus on learning and the language processing stuff going on with Mike. And yeah, I think that's why, it's hard to... Looking back, I don't quite know how I ended up on that decision. But I think that's it.

**Sophie Scott 15:42**

And it worked for you?

**Liz Wonnacott 15:44**

Yeah, it worked. I think. I definitely during my PhD had times of doubt about, not necessarily about going there in particular, but just about the process and the difficulty of doing research. There's a shift, so when you're an undergraduate and you're learning, and you're fascinated and then you go, and you start doing experiments and you realise a lot of them don't work. Certainly, I think things have changed a bit now but certainly at that time there was very much you have to get your positive finding before you can graduate even or before you can be a scientist and move on. So I, you know, I went through some periods of doubt in that time, but I stuck with it. And you know, I'm certainly glad I did at this point because in the end, I found things that did work, and I was interested in and could work on.

**Sophie Scott 16:38**

Excellent. And how did you... You don't have to answer if you don't want to, but how did you manage the sort of [INAUDIBLE] problem?

16:45

Yeah, no, it's a good problem, good problem, no good question. It is not a good problem, it's a problem for a lot of people. I was very lucky. My husband came with me and we were very lucky because Mike Tanenhaus needed a programmer at that time, and my husband was a computer programmer. And so he actually came and worked in the department where I was. And so yeah, I was incredibly lucky in that he made that, I guess that it was a sacrifice to some extent, I think he had very good career prospects in what he was doing in London. But, you know, that really, you know, he did that for me and that that's really... That's why we were able to survive, and I've been able to do this. And then we did a lot of life things while I was there. So it took a while for his visa to come through, but he came I think when I was in my second year. And then sometime in my third year, we came back to London and got married. And then I had my first baby in America. So my son's an American citizen. So, our son was born at the end of my fourth year, so all through my fifth year I was breastfeeding and writing my dissertation in pretty equal measures to be honest. Yeah, so, officially, I mean, it's a bit bonkers when you think about it, but officially, I didn't actually have any maternity leave, or at least no one ever mentioned the word to me. Um, but for me at that this time, and I'm not advocating this at all, but for me at that time, it worked quite well, because my husband was working. So we had the money to have help. I was just writing at that point. And so I sort of was able to kind of have someone there who I could give the baby to while I was writing but be there and breastfeed and do the things I wanted to be able to do with my baby as well. So for me at that time, it was fine.

**Sophie Scott 18:50**

I think one of the... I don't know if this was your experience as well, but one of the things that I found helpful when I was on maternity leaves was, I had no idea. I couldn't imagine what life would be like with a baby, other than that things would be different. I had no idea exactly how different and it did help to kind of, I'm not saying it's perfect, but no one's going to look at that PhD thesis and go, well, it doesn't really count it was written by a woman who was breastfeeding. There's... There are... We have some degree of flexibility in the work required of us as academics, it does mean you have a little bit more kind of time to, you know, play around, there aren't sort of things that if you're working, then you've got to be doing.

**Liz Wonnacott 19:33**

Yeah, I mean, there's no way I could have been working if I had a job where I had to be there. And I mean, I did see people in the US actually where they do only have their six weeks or eight weeks, if you had a C section as I did, and I have actually no idea how you get yourself out of bed and get to work in a particular place pumping milk all day if you were to breastfeed or whatever. I couldn't have done that. So yes, in a way for me, it was an ideal situation because in all honesty, I'm not the sort of person that is very good at playing games with babies all day. So for me having that kind of balance of right, I'm doing my own thing, and I'm quite good at saying like, now I'm writing, and now I'm with my child. You know, I find making that difference... I prefer it to be that way than to try and do everything at once. And I know, other people are different. I see amazing people who are able to be like, you know, kind of writing and chatting with their kids. I'm not personally, I have to do one thing at a time.

**Sophie Scott 19:38**

And I think it really helps to let yourself have the flexibility to find out what it's like for you because people are very different, and don't beat yourself up over how you think it should be. You know, I found... I always used to have a real structure to writing before I had a child. I'd plan the day and my afternoon would be spent writing; I'd write as long as I needed to. I can think of one paper where I just had to get a paper finished. I was working every night till 11 o'clock just to get it done. Fine, great, gone, done. And then that's it, can't do that anymore. That's just gone, and you have to be able to say no, you've got 20 minutes now do some writing and that took a while to learn that was doable.

**Liz Wonnacott 20:34**

It takes a while to adapt. I think for me, the hardest thing was before I had children, I would always get up, have a coffee and start working straight away and it might only be I'd work for half an hour but I would do it straight away and then I'd go off and have breakfast and do things and of course, that's gone when you have kids and yeah, I think it does take a while to adapt and everyone's got their own pattern haven't they. Your pattern changes. But lots of things can change, it's not just having children, lots of things in life change. And you know, you can be doing lots of different things, you can be ill, you can be looking after parents, you know, your partner might have a job that suddenly means you have to move to a different country. There are so many things in life that can change these patterns.

**Sophie Scott 22:05**

I looked at my publication rate wasn't bad for the year I was on maternity leave. It was two years after that it suddenly tanked because new stuff hadn't been starting and there was a gap. But I plotted out my partner's publication rate and he had a dip the year before because the year before I got pregnant, I had a bad accident. I mean, quite incapacitated and he had to spend a lot of time ferrying me around doctors and things and just he'd really blown a hole in about six months of the year for me. I wasn't too badly off, because I could still work but it really hurt his time and you can see that in his publication profile. So absolutely, it's by no means issues around childcare and looking after babies that are the only thing that can really start to blow a hole in an academic CV.

**Liz Wonnacott 22:53**

I think one of the, you know, slightly off topic for me, but just one of the things that I think is very, very difficult about early careers now is that there's just no leeway for that kind of, oh, this was a slow year, this was... The job market is so extreme now. I mean so okay maternity leave can go on a CV in principle, how much people really are taking that into account isn't always clear. But you know it's not just maternity leave, it's like you said it might be a year later that actually things catch up and your child might be sick or your partner might be sick and I think we've just got to a place where we're not allowing that those life things will be there for people, certainly at the early career stage.

**Sophie Scott 23:39**

Absolutely. I met someone when I was on a Wellcome fellowship, who was on the same scheme as me and he worked in technology. And there had been an accident in the lab, and he'd lost two years’ worth of work. Gone. Had to start all over again, because it was physical stuff that got destroyed in a flood. And then he was saying there's no sort of history or context around an academic CV. It is a terribly sparse thing. And if there's a gap, there's a gap. You can put it... The second thing on my CV is when I took maternity leave, but if people don't choose to read that then... So on that... But I think it's also let yourself be flexible and it certainly can be more manageable than you know, being a working parent is hard. Being a working carer is hard.

**Liz Wonnacott 24:32**

You know, I think sometimes in academia, we get very hung up on all the difficulties we have and for sure we do. But we have something so much easier, right. And that is, as you say, not having to be in a physical place between physical hours. And I don't think you can underestimate how much of a boon that is as a parent.

**Sophie Scott 24:50**

Absolutely. And like I say, no one looks at a paper and goes, well, this doesn't count, it was written by a woman...

**Liz Wonnacott 24:56**

Yeah, when you're looking back over six years, it always in a way all comes out in the wash.

**Sophie Scott 25:04**

The stuff around a CV, that’s for us to deal with as a community. That's no individual's problem.

**Liz Wonnacott 25:09**

No, absolutely, absolutely. Yeah.

**Sophie Scott 25:12**

So you've done your PhD in Rochester and you've had a baby, what was the next move for you because that's quite a lot going on?

**Liz Wonnacott 25:22**

We knew we wanted to move back to the UK, to put this in some context, this was the Bush years, so he'd just got his second presidency. And I think we also had a sort of sense of nostalgia and homesickness, and we, you know, kind of felt if we didn't go then, you know... So I originally applied for a postdoc, and with Kate Nation, which I didn't get, someone else got the postdoc. But Kate wrote to me afterwards and said, you know, would you like to apply for a fellowship to try and come here anyway, so that was in Oxford, where I still live. Yeah, and I did, and they sadly scrapped the scheme. That was the SRC one-year postdoc. They were so important. And I mean, for me that was... I had that. And we all relocated back to Oxford, my husband got a job in Oxford, and sort of on the basis of that，I then applied for more funding, and I was very lucky, I got a British Academy fellowship. And then that was kind of me, I ended up being, in Oxford, with another period of maternity leave and some part time, I ended up being there six years, off of that initial one year’s worth of funding.

**Sophie Scott 26:36**

I've seen... Several people in my lab have had them, well used to have them when it still existed as a scheme and they were fantastic things. It was exactly what you need. That's where we should be spending a lot more money, at people coming out of their PhDs.

**Liz Wonnacott 26:51**

They were supposed to be bringing them back or maybe they even have, but they've got this very odd stipulation where you can't apply for them until you've got a PhD. It's like about six months after you've got a PhD, and you've only got a year that you can do it. So it's only for people who've, I don't know, got maybe a partner who can support them or parents who can support them. Otherwise, they're just impractical, whereas for me, I applied for that while I was still in the States, and then I came back and I had that. And yeah, I mean, basically, I used that year to write stuff up and to apply for more funding, which worked.

**Sophie Scott 27:30**

Hopefully, they'll be re-appearances of this as a workable scheme at some point in the future, but they were great. And it did exactly what it said on the tin for you.

**Liz Wonnacott 27:38**

Yeah, it did. It worked out.

**Sophie Scott 27:40**

And what was the sort of next stages? So let me just quickly, where was your work going in this?

**Liz Wonnacott 27:46**

So yeah, really. I ended up, I'd tried lots of different things in my PhD which you could do in the States with having the five years, but where I ended up really was right back with the questions that had first got me interested actually, it was kind of the learnability questions. So I don't know how much to go into, but I guess the sort of deep, long standing question in language acquisition is this sort of idea of how do you infer this grammar on the basis of the input you get exposed to, and the learnability problem is that, you know, you just don't get enough information to tell you what the right grammar is. So, we know people generalise, we all generalise all the time. So, you can see this experimentally, if you teach people a new verb, they'll put it in a new structure, and you can see it if new words come into the language. I always like to horrify my students by saying, you know, Facebook wasn't always a verb. There was a time when none of us knew that word. But as soon as it became a noun, it became a verb. And then people started saying things like, oh, I'll Facebook you that later, right? And that's because we are creative with language. That's how it works. And certainly as kids learn language, that's what they do. But one of the sorts of things that creates a sort of learning or how on earth does this work is that despite the fact that you can generalise, you get these odd gaps in language where something seems like it should be grammatical and isn't. So, for example, verbs sometimes don't go into structures where you think they were. So you can say, throw me the ball, we can't say carry me the ball. Yeah, right. Or a really odd, you know, he gave the library a book, but we can't donate the library a book. So this is a sort of example of questions considered a deep learning question. And the sort of logical problem is, how do you know that these things aren't just sort of accidental gaps, you just happen not to have heard them, rather than systematically not in the grammar? So this learning you know, how can you know that that really isn't grammatical? And so that's a sort of deep, long standing question, which I found really fascinating even as an undergraduate and then I started reading more of the sort of statistical learning literature and some of the connectionist type literature and thinking about this more probabilistically and I suppose the sort of insight, you know, not originating with me, but that sort of informed my work is, you know, once you get away from the idea of thinking you've got this grammar and you absolutely know what is and isn't grammatical and you think about it more as probabilistic inference. You can't know you're never going to hear, he carried me that, but you end up knowing a lot about carry and how it the structures it does go in and that kind of allows you to sort of make an inference like, oh, actually, I'm not talking about conscious inference, but the system kind of figures out, okay, that really doesn't go in that structure. And so what I ended up doing in my thesis was an artificial language study initially with adults where I kind of taught them a new language that had verbs and structures that in some did occur and some structures and some didn't. And I looked at how things like verb frequency and other statistical factors of the language influenced generalisation and also, I looked at processing. So were you like predicting what structuring you were hearing and that's how Mike Tanenhaus kind of became involved in the project. So that's where I ended up going and that's still a massive theme in my work now. I do other things as well. And I do things on reading and, you know, broader things as well with the people I work with. But that's still actually kind of core in my interest and what I think about.

**Sophie Scott 31:23**

And that was what was done in your fellowships?

**Liz Wonnacott 31:26**

Yeah, so in my fellowships, I was trying to do some of that stuff with kids, proved to be really, really hard to do, took me four years to figure out paradigms that would work with kids. And so I was trying to do that and trying to look at all the kind of cues that might interact with statistical cues, like meaning based cues, sound-based cues, that kind of thing. And yes, and also some computational work mostly in collaboration with other people. At that time thinking about it in terms of kind of Bayesian models and thinking about the computational kinds of processes that could underpin this kind of learning. And so that's what I did in my fellowships.

**Sophie Scott 32:10**

And you had a small family at that time was that...?

**Liz Wonnacott 32:14**

So when did I have...? I had Katie five years after Henry, so that was just at the end. My British Academy fellowship was ending, and I would have been out of a job. But actually, I was able to take a year’s maternity leave, and then come back very part time and stretch out enough time to get my first faculty job. So actually, you know, I really benefited from that. And I was also geographically constrained. So I was working and was living in Oxford. And it wasn't possible at that time for us to move for family reasons. But I was lucky because Oxford is quite commutable to a lot of places that happened to do what we do. So Warwick, Reading, Royal Holloway, I was applying to all these places. And I ended up getting my first lectureship in Warwick.

**Sophie Scott 33:08**

Oh, right. Yeah. So you're commuting. I suppose I think of that being in the Midlands, but I suppose it's not that far.

**Liz Wonnacott 33:13**

No, it's actually easier from Oxford than here is from Oxford, actually. So yeah, it's about an hour and a half in the car.

**Sophie Scott 33:19**

And how was that?

**Liz Wonnacott 33:21**

The commute? There's a shock when you get a first faculty job about the reality of kind of balancing teaching and research and all those things, and I definitely had difficult moments in there with that, but I also had some very good experiences, and I met some great people. They supported me well, in terms of helping me get grants and you know, all that kind of thing. So yeah.

**Sophie Scott 33:55**

It can be a really... I say this as someone who went into a faculty position sort of by coming off a fellowship. So I wasn't in this position, but I do tell people if you're going for your first lectureship really pay attention to the department because it can make a huge difference as a new lecturer, how well places treat someone who is fresh into this.

**Liz Wonnacott 34:18**

Yeah, I think there were good and bad. I think there were places where I could have got more support. But, you know, when I hear stories of what some other people go through, I mean, my load was very, very light. So in the context of other places, I was definitely given... I was given the time to do my research. And that is so important. I wouldn't be here now if I hadn't had that support in that time.

**Sophie Scott 34:20**

Did you apply for grants while you were there to carry on supporting your work?

**Liz Wonnacott 34:46**

Yes, I did. So I'd got the SRC grant when I was at Oxford and I took that with me. And then I applied for more funding when I was at Warwick, one as Co-I in collaboration with people at Edinburgh, Kenny Smith at Edinburgh who is a long-term collaborator now and then my own funding, with myself as PI. And working with Helen brown at Warwick. That work went more in the direction of trying to look at some of the... actually doing some of the types of experiments I was doing with children and adults, one of the things I was thinking about was actually how hard children find some of these language learning tasks. So there's a bit of a, you know, we think of children as sort of soaking up language in the environment. I think that's actually not a particularly good analogy. And I certainly think if you see in an experimental context, children find it very, very difficult actually, to take in language very fast. So older learners generally outperform children in those sorts of context. So I kind of came into it thinking about the learnability questions that kind of came from first language learning, but I was then also starting to think about, you know, teaching second languages in the classroom and what kind of materials would work for children, so looking at things like you know, for adults it really helps if the talkers keep changing because then there's evidence that that can help you kind of remember the words better. Actually for children, turns out that might not be the case because they're just struggling so much with attending to the different speakers that that can hinder them in actually doing what you wanted them to sort of focus on in the tasks, so that's where that work kind of went

**Sophie Scott 36:26**

That's really interesting. If you look at the speech and noise literature, adults struggle most with speech against like a background noise like a fan or something and they can cope relatively well with background talkers. Children, it's the other way around, children really struggle with ignoring other speech, it seems to be a speech perception mechanism. They are... Part of being an adult listener is being able to tune into and get rid of speech that is definitely not your target stuff. It gets in, but it doesn't disrupt you in the same way. And children are kind of floored by it. Most floored by adults.

**Liz Wonnacott 37:02**

It's interesting. Yeah, maybe we should have... That's such an interesting idea which I've never thought about. The stimuli are always other adults. Right, isn't it? Yeah. And when you think about naturalistic learning a lot of children's input must be from each other.

**Sophie Scott 37:16**

Yeah, but certainly and they do seem to process it qualitatively differently.

**Liz Wonnacott 37:20**

Interesting, thanks for the tip. I think about four years. I slightly lost track but yes, I think about it in terms of help how old my kids were when I went in and out so yeah, I think I went when Katie was born, and I think she was about five when I left.

**Sophie Scott 37:40**

And what made you move on from there or were you just always interested in...?

**Liz Wonnacott 37:45**

I... In terms of teaching, I was in a psychology department there and one of the things I found quite frustrating was you know, I love language as you've probably picked up, so I you know, I have all these ideas and thoughts and I. And I felt that a lot of the students who were coming in for a straight psychology degree, and, you know, I mean, this isn't just Warwick, this is very, very common. I've spoken to lots of people, language is not generally what they think of when they come in for a degree. And if they do, they think of it more in terms of, you know, how language might influence people to do x, y and z rather than cognitive models. So I sort of, in some ways, felt not exactly out of place, but I felt like you know, when I was at Rochester, I was in a cognitive science department. At Oxford, it was experimental psychology and there were also some students who were beginning to be joint with linguistics. So there were more people that were coming in with that interest. So here the big pull was, it's a division of psychology and language sciences. And the degree I teach on, they've all kind of chosen to do a degree which is a combination, they know from the outset, of psychology and language. So that was a big pull.

**Sophie Scott 39:01**

How was the move? How was the process?

**Liz Wonnacott 39:04**

Well, I didn't move house. So it's a longer commute, so that's harder. But, you know, again, I got great colleagues here, I've been very well supported, certainly in terms of, again applying for funding. The big thing for me as well, I found it out, maybe it's just coincidence of what happens when, but I had about three PhD students who I thought I was going to get, and then they ended up going somewhere else. And here, I've been able to have some great PhD students. And you know that that's made a massive difference.

**Sophie Scott 39:40**

And if it's not a stupid question, do you have advice because commuting is not easy. Commuting is an extra level of stuff to deal with in addition to working, in addition to having people to look after.

**Liz Wonnacott 39:52**

I guess I've just done it for a long time. And we have considered relocating to London now but for various reasons, schools and things like that, we are staying where we are for now. I couldn't do it now, for my life now, I couldn't do it without having a nanny. I know that's not an option for everybody and I know other people that make it work by kind of, you know, taking it in turns to be the day they work at home and that kind of thing. But unfortunately, at the moment, my husband has not got any flexibility. So for me right now, I have to have a nanny. Other advice, I don't... Yeah, that's a good, okay, so I do... I try and work on the hour journey. I think the other thing though, is to sort of be kind to yourself. So I do try and work on that hour. So there's an hour train journey from London, the whole commute takes about two hours. I don't do it every day, by the way. I stay over in London sometimes, that's the other thing. But I think for example, in the morning, I always try and work, but you know, I'm going to leave here in 15 minutes and go and sit on the train. I'm really tired. So I'm not going to make myself try and write a paper. I might read some papers, or, you know, to be completely honest, I might look at what the hell our government's doing on Twitter and the BBC for 45 minutes. So I think I think there is a sense in which you feel like I've got to use every minute. And sometimes you have to think, no, actually, I need a break, right.

**Sophie Scott 41:23**

You've got to give yourself a break. I think the only thing that I've learned with getting older is that really life isn't a randomised controlled trial. And you should allow... Don't assume [INAUDIBLE] if you've done nothing but work but... And there's so many other demands on your time you have to build something in where you let yourself, whatever it is that works for you.

**Liz Wonnacott 41:46**

I find it easier to be kinder to myself as I get older actually, I think maybe that's partly my health isn't quite as sort of just free as it was when I was younger. I have to exercise, or you know, there are some things but just get giving yourself a little bit of a break and not being so angry with yourself for not achieving what... I think that does get good things about...

**Sophie Scott 42:05**

I think it's true. And I definitely build space into my day, into my life, like I I'm not working now I'm just going to do something I want to do, which is hang out with my son, or, you know, make time to do stuff as a family or I will make time to exercise, I will just... because these are all things that will make me better as a result. And that's got to be part of a day, it can't all be absolute grindstone.

**Liz Wonnacott 42:35**

Yeah. And kids can be good for making... I think that maybe part of the shift, maybe it would happen anyway when you got older, but part of the shift is realising of, you know, things don't totally... The world doesn't fall apart because I no longer work all weekends, you know.

**Sophie Scott 42:48**

And even just, I can remember when my son was very small, and there was someone in the US, thank goodness this was before the days of social media, but there was someone in the US who every so often would send me quite offensive emails and it was right over on the west coast, so I would get them first thing in the morning, and I can remember, they just went on a spate of them. And when Hector was very small, I was checking my email, and it was horrible email. And I was like looking at Hector and I kind of felt like I don't like feeling like this around the baby. And then another horrible email came in because I replied to him, and I thought, I can just delete this. I can just click delete; I don't have to read it. And I can go hang out with my baby. Let's do this. There's no law that says you have to engage with this horrible man. And it was one of the happiest moments of my life. I don't think I probably wouldn't have got there if it hadn't been for you know, for the baby. Yeah, but not liking feeling angry around him. Yeah, it was good. So, what do you find works for you in a general sense? Do you have any other things that you'd like to, so you know, kind of giving yourself some space, taking you know, you can organise life up to certain points, but some other things are kind of built in. So it's not always possible to move to where you work is. How do you make this work for you?

**Liz Wonnacott 44:15**

I do think you have to be very self-motivated and organised and I think if... But I think most of us are. I think actually I have to say I find it very, very difficult to give advice so you know, sometimes we do these early career things for people and everyone talks about, how do you write, how do you do this? And I do have things I do. I think it's very, very personal what works for you, so for example for me... I know some people who absolutely swear by setting a timer and I write for a certain amount of time. I cannot do that. So I sort of write while the thoughts are coming and then when they stop coming, I go and get a cup of tea or coffee or something or I move on to different tasks. So I do find it very difficult. I think that one thing is that you can't... You have to be your own sort of self-motivator for the bits, certainly for the bits of the job that we most like and want to do a lot of the time. So sometimes the admin stuff is just there. And someone else will tell you off if you don't do it but the stuff that we want to do. Sometimes it's hard to make yourself get started on something, all those sorts of things and you know, endless lists and being very organised is for me, the only way I can survive in this game.

**Sophie Scott 45:33**

And are there any particular aspects about UCL's approach to sort of flexibility in the workplace that you found useful?

**Liz Wonnacott 45:39**

I think the... So, I think that's a really good point. So actually, I'm thinking about where I've been before and you know, I think one thing that made a massive difference to me actually was when I was in the negotiation stage that you go through when you get a job and talking about things and I remember saying to David Shanks at the time, will, you know... I like to be up front about these things, so there will be, you know, a couple of days a week where I will probably work at home. And he was just like, of course. Who wouldn't? Yeah, and it was just utterly assumed and that for me made me feel not like an outsider. I think that's a massive thing. And I hope we keep that, you know, long live that because that's what means, you know, whatever is going on in your life? You've got a bit of give. Yeah, so you asked me before about commuting. If I had to be in every day, I couldn't do it, I'd have to do something different. And that is what has made it possible for me, I guess to be an academic actually, if I think about it like that.

**Sophie Scott 46:47**

Fantastic. Well, is there anything else that you'd like to add?

**Liz Wonnacott 46:51**

Not that I can think of.

**Sophie Scott 46:51**

It's a very sunny day. I imagine it's rather nice to be going home to not London.

**Liz Wonnacott 46:56**

Yes, actually last night I wasn't home, so I'm very much looking forward to going home.

**Sophie Scott 47:11**

Thanks for listening, this has been What Works. My name is Sophie Scott.