



University of
Western Sydney

INSTITUTE FOR
CULTURE AND SOCIETY

Spotlight on Dr Stephanie Alice Baker

Since graduating with a Doctor of Philosophy at UWS in 2010, Dr Stephanie Alice Baker has gone on to achieve notable success. We chat to her about what it takes to complete an award-winning dissertation and about life after the PhD.

ICS: You've received the European Association for the Sociology of Sport's Young Researcher's Award; were awarded an Endeavour Research Fellowship; won an Emerald Literati Network Award for Excellence; secured a full-time research position at Goldsmiths, University of London; and recently had your book accepted for publication with Palgrave Macmillan, New York – all within three years of graduating as a PhD student. Talk us through your PhD journey at UWS.

I spent the final year and a half of my PhD at UWS, having transferred from the University of Sydney, where I commenced the first two years of my PhD. The supervision and funding opportunities provided by UWS to complete my PhD and to present at international conferences proved invaluable. One of the benefits of ICS is that academics are research active, contributing to the development of their respective fields. This means that supervisors can impart their knowledge, skills and experience onto students.

ICS: What would you regard as key to successfully completing a PhD?

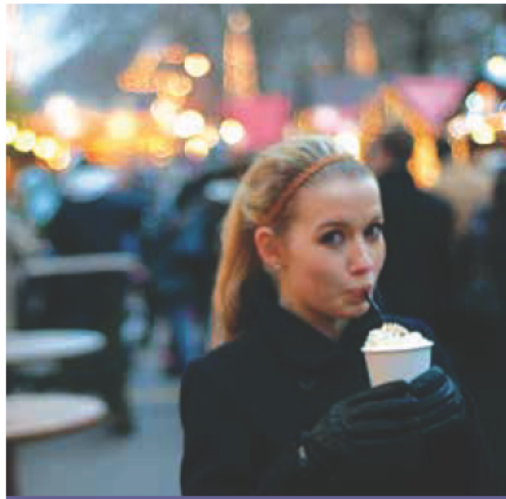
To complete a PhD successfully requires tenacity and support. I was fortunate to be funded by the University, which meant that I could focus solely on the thesis. I also have

close friends and family, and was in a supportive relationship at the time. Writing can be a lonely process and these people provided much needed encouragement and reprieve from study.

But without a doubt, I think the most important ingredient of a PhD is supervision. In 2007 I moved to England to work as a Visiting Fellow

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with Professor Jack Barbalet at the University of Leicester, where he worked before moving to UWS. Jack, who is currently an Adjunct Professor at ICS, is one of the leading scholars in the sociology of emotions and it was a privilege to have the opportunity to work with him. At the time I was a year and a half into my PhD and submerged in a deluge of literature. I recall leaving our first meeting with clarity and eager to write. Just by posing certain questions, Jack enabled me to re-evaluate my research question. The experience was



Dr Baker in London



Dr Baker in India



Dr Baker in London's Hyde Park



Dr Baker in Paris



Dr Baker in India

comparable to a compass directing a ship, pointing the way without steering the project. In a sense, Jack was employing the Socratic method to train me to become an independent researcher. Once you really understand what you're investigating, which involves refining your research question, the writing process begins to flow.

When I transferred to UWS with Jack in 2008, Professor David Rowe (ICS) came on board as my associate supervisor. I worked closely with David for the next year and a half, and we still have a strong working relationship. He was extremely generous with his time (holding regular meetings, closely reading drafts), and a stickler for grammar. So I am indebted to him for any success I have had as a writer. I can also see the influence that David has had on my current and future research. As an expert in media culture and communication, David informed my interest in the field. The project that I've embarked on at Goldsmiths requires expertise in digital studies, and much of this knowledge and experience was cultivated through David and I working together.

Finally, examiners are crucial for any aspiring academic. In an ideal situation these people will also act as mentors for junior academics. I wrote the book as part of Palgrave's Cultural Sociology series upon the request of one of my PhD examiners, Professor Jeffrey Alexander, whom I recently had the opportunity to meet. He, too, has played a significant role in the direction of my academic career.

ICS: What was the transition like from being a PhD student to conducting research in India?

The Endeavour Research Award enabled me to proceed straight from my PhD into a research post at the Indian Institute of Technology in Mumbai, where I was hosted for six months.

IIT's campus is spectacular, bordering Sanjay Gandhi National Park and Powai Lake. After spending the first three months in Mumbai, I moved to the Himalayas for three months to conduct fieldwork on myth, ritual and emotions. I was then able to spend a seventh month travelling to Kashmir and other parts of the country. India provided a great transition between the PhD and more routine academic life. I still have regular communication with many of those whom I met there.

ICS: Where did your career travel after India?

Upon returning to Australia from India in 2010, I worked as a Research Assistant for both of my ICS PhD supervisors, Jack Barbalet and David Rowe, before moving to London, where I took up a lecturing post at the University of Greenwich between 2010 and 2012.

In addition to lecturing, I spent the next two years writing prodigiously – continuing to assist David Rowe on several research projects and developing my PhD into a book (naively underestimating the amount of work involved to develop one case study into five). In 2011, the European Association for the Sociology of Sport awarded me a prize for a paper based on my dissertation, which was encouraging.

May 2013 was a major turning point in my academic career. I had my book, *Social Tragedy: The Power of Myth, Ritual and Emotion in the New Media Ecology*, accepted for publication; received the Emerald Literati Network

Award; was offered a Visiting Fellowship in Norway and appointed as a full-time Researcher at Goldsmiths, University of London. It's a tough climate to be working in London as an academic, particularly as a researcher, so to acquire a full-time post at a university with a reputation for high quality, innovative research is a dream come true!

ICS: What wisdom would you like to share with current or prospective PhD students?

I think there are two vital factors that students need to consider when embarking on a PhD – supervision and passion. A PhD can be a lonely experience, especially if you travel. It's common, as with any creative process, to feel oscillating experiences of enthusiasm and doubt. There's no substitute for hard work, of course, but passion for your topic and competent supervisors will enable you to overcome the inevitable feelings of uncertainty and frustration that come with research. I imagine that what works for one person in terms of supervision doesn't necessarily work for another, so it's really about finding the right fit for you in terms of expertise, temperament, and skills.

Finally, I think it's important to be malleable. By that I mean being able to respond to emergent issues, rather than remaining fixed on employing specific theories or pursuing certain empirical topics. My interest in digital studies is an example of this. For the book I wrote several case studies that were discarded because I chose to incorporate chapters on the 2011 English riots and the social media campaign, KONY 2012. These case studies resonated with the broader resistance movements that occurred in various global locations from late 2010 and continued throughout much of 2011-13, including Anonymous's defence of Wikileaks, the Arab Spring, and the Occupy movement, to name a few. Given the salience of these issues, I have found writing about such topics to be both stimulating and rewarding.

ICS: What are your aspirations for the future?

At the moment I'm focussed on my new position at Goldsmiths. I am collaborating with Dr Evelyn Ruppert and a team of European researchers on a project concerned with 'Socialising Big Data'. It is exciting to be involved in collaborative research of this kind and to contribute to this nascent field. I also hope to receive a postdoctoral fellowship in the next couple of years, so I can continue to pursue research on cultural sociology and the role of emotions in digital modes of communication.