



Left to right: Andreea, Vanessa, Tracy, Rafik, Lien, Bidisha

## BRIGHAM AND WOMEN'S HOSPITAL POSTDOCTORAL ASSOCIATION

# Postdoctoral Personal Experience During COVID-19 Lockdown

By Rafik Boudra, Ph.D.

It is no news that the COVID19 pandemic has impacted the postdoc community really hard, mainly by forcing us to shift our work from the labs to our homes thereby significantly affecting our productivity, especially for those that do wet lab experiments. I remember being very optimistic that I would put all the lockdown time to good use, notably by finishing the writings I had to do for my papers, taking bioinformatic courses, participating in virtual conferences and seminars. While I have done quite a bit, my output during the lockdown was much lower than I had expected.

The impossibility to be in the lab to conduct experiment and, more importantly, to see and interact with colleagues took a huge toll on my motivation. Even when we went back to the lab, I was assigned to a 6am-2pm shift, with limited interaction with other lab members, and even limited interaction with most of my friends who were doing afternoon/evening shifts. However, not everything was grim during these difficult times.

Taking a step back from the bench and having the time to think about my project really helped refocusing my work in order to be as efficient as possible. I think that I, as well as many other postdocs, are often caught into an endless stream of experiment, which can be detrimental as it might cut us off from seeing the big picture.

Another very good side effect of the lockdown was that, paradoxically, and because everybody was stuck at home, I was interacting with my family and friends back in Europe much more than I used to do pre-pandemic, and that felt amazing. I also learned how to play chess to pass time during these long weekends where we were stuck at home, and that became a great new hobby!

Overall, even though the pandemic had an immediate negative effect on my postdoc, I think that I learned an invaluable lesson: taking things a bit slower from time to time, think more and act less, and enjoy interacting more with friends and family, especially those that are far, might just be as, if not more, productive than being a bench addict who doesn't take the time to take a breath. Slow and steady wins the race!

### EDITORIAL TEAM

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Interested in joining the editorial team or becoming a contributor? Do you have a question, comment, or ideas for our next issue? Let us know!

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# The BWH Post(Doc)

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PostDoctoral Association

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Check out [Toastmasters International](#)

#### ["Postdoctoral Scholar Award for Excellence in Mentoring"](#)

A cash award of \$1,000 will be presented to two outstanding BWH fellows who demonstrate excellent mentorship and commitment. Nominations accepted through **11:00PM, Sunday, August 1<sup>st</sup>**. Nominations can be submitted by PIs, postdocs, students, and/or research staff.

## Career-Speak series

by Bidisha Mitra, Ph.D.



This series will introduce a professional and their interview outlining their career trajectory from being a graduate student through post-doctoral experience to transitioning to a position.

For our first scientist in the industry, I had the pleasure of interviewing Dr. Lakshmi Prabhu, currently a Research Scientist at Gilead Sciences Inc. and a long-time friend. In this interview, Dr. Prabhu walks us through her careerist journey, shares advice on life-work balance and tips on going about job-search in a formidable situation we are currently living in especially for those looking to transition.

### **Q. Please introduce yourself (include in brief your career transitions and highlights and what do you specialize in)**

My name is Lakshmi Prabhu, and I am a Research Scientist working at Gilead Sciences Inc. in the Immuno-Oncology Group. I completed my MS in Cell and Molecular Biology from San Diego State University and a PhD in Pharmacology from Indiana University School of Medicine. Before transitioning to my current position, I was a Postdoctoral Scientist at Boehringer Ingelheim Pharmaceuticals Inc. working on metabolic disease.

### **Q. How did your past experiences prepare you for the position?**

With over 8+ years of experience conducting bench work and planning research projects in graduate school and postdoc, I was well-equipped in terms of technical skills required for a Scientist position. Additionally, since my postdoc was in the pharmaceutical industry, I was exposed to the culture, pace, and expectations within this work environment, which helped me to transition easily into my current role.

### **Q. Job-search is becoming a daunting experience for many in the imminent situation that the world has been facing. How did you approach this fear and go about in your initial preparatory stages of exploring for your current position?**

Job search can be tiring during “normal” times, so being in a pandemic elevates the experience to a whole different level. However, its best to keep it simple (pandemic or not) and to have a clear understanding of the *why*, *when*, and *how*.

*Why* – the reason *why* you want to transition: whether you are in a difficult working environment, have reached the end of a project and/or are plain unhappy/bored with your current career path and want to make a switch, it is good to always keep this goal in mind to motivate yourself when things get stressful with the job search.

*When* – this the timeframe you want to give yourself for the various aspects of job search – initial resume preparation, updating professional social media profiles, the actual application process and an overall projected time to transition. These dates can move up or down depending on how long it takes for each step, but it is wise to allocate time in your day/week to work on one or more aspects so that you can be organized and focused during an otherwise lengthy process.

*How* – Which job profiles do you like? Which websites offer customizable job searches for the geographical area and profile you are interested in and can send email updates when such roles pop up? Who in your current network can be leveraged to have informational interviews with or provide referrals? How do you format your LinkedIn to have recruiters be interested in you? Working towards these points will help in getting closer to finding and applying for jobs you are truly interested in.

### **Q. What are your expectations from an employer when you are interviewing for a position?**

I have two main expectations: one personal and the other professional. Personal, I strive for work-life balance and I appreciate a team whose culture is mindful of the same. Professionally, I look for what value I can bring to the team as well as what the position can do to help me build my skillset so that I continue to move onwards and upwards in my career.

### **Q. How has the experience of relocating across the country amidst the pandemic been for you?**

I think the experience was mostly very smooth, since the relocation was covered by my new employer. So, I was saved from the arduous task of moving from coast to coast all by myself and a U-Haul! Admittedly, getting into an airplane with several strangers after months of self-isolation was anxiety-inducing but I was safely able to make it to the new area without any glitches. Pandemic aside, I enjoy living in new parts of the country as the cultural experience is so varied across the States, hence I am looking forward to my time here in the Bay Area.

### **Q. What does a typical day look for you in your current position?**

Meetings, meetings, and lots of meetings! Besides this, my day looks very similar to time spent in grad school and postdoc - reading literature, planning, and executing experiments, analyzing data, and discussing results with my manager, team and senior management. I also get the opportunity to participate in “academia-like” activities such as lab meetings, attending and presenting at conferences, journal club, etc. at my current company.

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## Black Scientists: We Exist

by Yvon Woappi, Ph.D.

This past year, the senseless killings of George Floyd, Breanna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery ignited a national and international determination to directly confront anti-Black racism, and systemic racism more broadly. At BWH and HMS, the leadership is sagaciously committed to addressing institutional racial biases and the inequities perpetuated by them, as well as the damage they are doing and have done over the years.



Through this effort, it has become evident that a lack of diverse research faculty representation is a reality that most U.S institutions of higher learning are facing. Indeed, of the top 50 STEM research institutions in the U.S, a mere 5% of tenure-track faculty are from underrepresented minority groups and, a demoralizingly, 1.6% are Black<sup>1,2</sup>. This not only reflects historic injustices, but also reveals a present-day perpetuation of racism in STEM.

Yet, WE EXIST! Black excellence has never been more ubiquitous.

In fact, while the number of Black biomedical Ph.D. graduates continues to increase in the U.S every year<sup>3</sup>, its representation in scientific leadership positions and the academe substantially lingers<sup>4</sup>.

To eradicate this pervasive attrition, inventive strategic efforts must be instituted for an effected transformation. In biomedical science, postdoctoral training represents a pivotal career node to launch scientists into academia and a spectrum of other scientific professions. To that effect, we have established the HMS Black Postdoctoral Association (HBPA) who works closely with the Dean's office, the Office for Diversity Inclusion and Community Partnership (DICP), as well as the HMS/HSDM Office for Postdoctoral Fellows.

HBPA's **goal** is patent — to improve the representation of scientists of color, particularly Black scholars, within the professoriate and the scientific leadership community. HBPA serves as a network amalgamating postdoctoral fellows from BWH, FAS, the HMS Quad, and the other 14 HMS-affiliate hospitals and institutions throughout the Harvard community. Our efforts converge to the intent of enhancing belonging, promoting social well-being, while enabling the exchange of information and opportunities for professional development and career advancement of its members. We ebulliently present this resource to BWH and invite you to join in this propitious effort that we believe vastly enriches the postdoctoral experience of all fellows across HMS.

To get involved, participate, or to partner with HBPA, visit our [website here](#), or email us at: HBPA@hms.harvard.edu, and follow us on twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram: @HMSBPA.

[1] Women, Minorities, and Persons with Disabilities in Science and Engineering: 2019 | NSF - National Science Foundation. <https://ncses.nsf.gov/pubs/nsf19304/>.

[2] Nelson, D. J. Diversity of Science and Engineering Faculty at Research Universities. in *Diversity in the Scientific Community Volume 1: Quantifying Diversity and Formulating Success* vol. 1255 15–86 (American Chemical Society, 2017).

[3] Gibbs KD, Basson J, Xierali IM, Broniatowski DA. Decoupling of the minority PhD talent pool and assistant professor hiring in medical school basic science departments in the US. *Elife*. 2016;5:e21393.

[4] Valantine HA, Lund PK, Gammie AE. From the NIH: A Systems Approach to Increasing the Diversity of the Biomedical Research Workforce. *CBE Life Sci Educ*. 2016;15(3):fe4.

## Thoughts About STOP ASIAN HATE from An International Postdoc

by Tracy Qin, Ph.D.

Stop Asian Hate is the name of several anti-Asian-violence rallies which have been held across the United States in 2021 in response to racism against Asian Americans related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of these rallies took place after the Atlanta spa shootings on March 16, 2021. In this shooting, 8 people were killed, 6 of whom were Asian women. Although the suspect has not been charged of a hate crime, some commentators characterized the shootings as such and pointed to the background of rising anti-Asian sentiment in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic, which have been approved in some studies. For example, the Center for the study of Hate and Extremism at California State University, San Bernardino reported that the hate crimes against Asians have increased by 150% in 2020. What's more, the STOP AAPI Hate (Stop Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders Hate), a nonprofit organization that runs the Stop AAPI Hate Reporting Center, has received 6,603 hate crime incidents since last year.

Have you ever experienced racism? For me, most of the people I met here during the past 7 years, are very friendly and helped me a lot in life, work, and study. I have sometimes experienced some prejudices and stereotypes because of different cultures, but racism has never happened in my daily life. Except for one time, when I was traveling to an unfamiliar place and shopping in an outlet, I heard a lady behind me suddenly told her child, "Look, she is a thief." What? I got shocked and immediately stepped forward and told her, "Excuse me, I am not a thief." However, she denied what she said, instead of saying, "Do you understand Spanish? I was speaking Spanish." I told her again, "I am not a thief." Maybe this is not racism, but it did hurt my feeling. I could understand how depressed if someone directly got insulted due to racism. It does happen around us. One of my friends, a Chinese woman, was filling up her car at a gas station. Suddenly, a stranger pulled up beside her, rolled down the window, and then yelled at her, "Chinese B\*\*\*". She didn't report to the police since the stranger immediately drove away after yelling. She told me that, "I was stuck for a minute and was down for several days."

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# How Would You Promote Your Article Once Published?

by Vanessa Sue Wacleche, Ph.D.

In a previous article entitled “*What Are Your Reading Habits?*” published in our last newsletter, we had learned that 74% of post-docs felt that they do not have enough time to read. This knowledge came from a 2019-2020 survey conducted by our very own Brigham & Women’s Communications committee. The primary goal of a postdoctoral fellow is to generate enough findings to be published in a respectable peer review journal. However, once this objective is achieved, the big question that pops-up is **what can scientists do to promote their work?** Is giving talks at conferences and other related public platforms the only way to publicize one’s works? Should scientists rely only on the respective journal’s visibility or PubMed? The answer to the 3 previous questions is a simple NO! Unaware to most, there are services a postdoctoral fellow can use for free to promote his/hers/their work. This article proposes two such invaluable resources available: 1) the Brigham’s Office of Strategic Communication (or the equivalent in other institutions) and 2) the Research Science Network (RSN).

According to the above mentioned 2019-2020 survey, 90% of postdocs are not aware of the Brigham’s Office of Strategic Communication which serves the goal of promoting the work of members from BWH. The office comprises teams with expertise in promoting basic, translational, and clinical research and has excellent track record in securing coverage. For press releases, the office maintains a list of hundreds of reporters that includes broadcast, radio, and print journalists from local, national and international news outlets. For outstanding breakthroughs that can impact several research fields and are published in the high-impact factor journals such as *Science* and *Nature*, the office releases press briefs that reach thousands of science reporters and that can be featured in the “*What’s New in Research*” section of *Brigham Clinical & Research News*. The authors don’t need to draft anything upon request of media exposure. In fact, press releases and briefs can only be issued by the office. A team from the office actively works with the scientists on the best messages to send out. Through maintaining a close relationship with the members of the press, the office has built a lot of institutional knowledge about what the reporters are looking for and what mechanism may work best for enticing them about a specific new study. Media coverages are tracked and shared in the News section, which appears both online and in media highlights in the weekly *Brigham in Brief* e-newsletter. Furthermore, sending *Tweets* under the account [@BrighamResearch](#), which has more than 5,000 followers, is another strategy used by the office.

Here are additional facts to know about the Brigham’s Office of Strategic Communication:

- The office ask that the authors contact their team 1-2 weeks prior to publication to ensure an appropriate and proactive communication strategy.
- The office is happy to connect Brigham researchers with entities outside of the Brigham to coordinate additional publicity efforts when appropriate. These communications need to be originated from the office.
- Since postdocs and professors are also affiliated to Harvard Medical School, one might consider contacting the associated communication office at Harvard. If they do so, the team from HMS will redirect the requesters to the Brigham.

The second incredible resource for promoting a newly published article can be provided by an initiative supported by Harvard Innovation Lab called The Research Science Network (RSN). RSN is a platform offered to any scientist from every level (undergraduate students to full-time professors) that provides video abstracts of recently published articles. This is a project in the making with their launch being in 2020. The issue RSN is addressing is the lack of time scientists have for reading, understanding and accumulating key data from an article. RSN wants scientists to feel satisfied and comfortable in updating themselves with the novel scientific discoveries coming in at a rapid pace. The RSN has two major missions. First, they aim to provide enough content for the audience to understand the key findings of a research article. They are trying to capture the impression one might have after 6 months of reading an article. Presently, they are covering the fields focused on Cancer, COVID-19 and Computer Science. Having said that, RSN is also open to covering other subjects upon request. RSN’s model serves and helps the scientist in rapidly scanning the wide world of literature and choose whether an article fits their interests for deep-reading. RSN also offers to publish the primary data that makes the findings compelling. Second, the RSN works to promote authors. The majority of the video abstracts feature the authors narrating their story and answering questions that may not be easily obtained upon by just reading the article. The video abstracts follow the structure of an article. Therefore, the audience is required to be fluent in the scientific concepts to be able to understand the study. For postdocs, this is a way to promote themselves, get exposure and obtain somehow an advantage for when the time comes to make that transition for the next position, giving them a recognition for their future employers. Postdocs are allowed to write their interview on their CV and share the link on their social media. RSN has a team that makes sure the interviewee is well represented and receive help, if needed, in drafting their response to the questions and give tips on how to concisely present their data. The videos abstract last 5-6 min, equivalent to that of a simple centrifugation time.

Here are some additional facts to know regarding RSN:

- The article needs to be published within 6 months prior to the requested date for an interview
  - RSN accepts interview requests from the first and/or senior authors
  - A list of questions is provided for preparation before the interview
- The reference of the article includes the authors’ name, the institution, and the journal are featured.

For more information on The Brigham’s Office of Strategic Communication and RSN, please visit their respective websites:

<https://www.brighamandwomens.org/about-bwh/newsroom/contact-bwh-communications-and-public-affairs>

[www.researchsciencenetwork.com](http://www.researchsciencenetwork.com)

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How do you deal with racist people? Hiding in the comfort of silence would not have been successful. On the premise of ensuring the safety of life, you may want to calm down and react towards the tissue, not the person, tell them this is racism. At the same time, you may want to use your phone to record what happened and be the first to call the police. It may be less useful to educate, even these racist people are casual racist. There is a high probability that they won't want to change.

To stop Asian hate, we can start from around, from ourselves, participate more in public activities. Whether in the schools or companies, we need to speak out and actively oppose Asian discrimination. This is a long-term process, but more and more people have been aware of it.

## Zoom Fatigue

by Andreea Stancu, M.D.

Videoconference meetings became a critical tool during the COVID-19 pandemic and enabled schools and businesses to continue working. The current Zoom interface has been an essential tool for productivity, learning and social interactions and the new practice of taking meetings virtually became the new normal or the future normal. If the usage of telecommuting successfully survives the post pandemic era, it has been demonstrated that fossil fuel consumption would decrease due to a reduction in physical commuting. While this computer-mediated technology brings important benefits, videoconferencing all day becomes exhausting, and the term "Zoom Fatigue" has, hence, emerged quickly with time.

### Why "Zoom Fatigue"?

Apparently, there are four explanations: excessive close-up eye-gaze, cognitive load, increased self-evaluation from staring at the video of oneself, and constraints on physical mobility.

### Let's dive a bit deeper in understanding each of the above-mentioned

**Excessive close-up eye gaze.** Let us consider an elevator where people are forced to stand very close to strangers. This situation leads to a degree of discomfort which forces everyone to look away to minimize eye contact. Meanwhile, on Zoom or other similar virtual platforms, that were once spaces reserved for close relationships, have become a way to interact with coworkers or even strangers leading to extensive eye contact as the strongest facial cue being readily available that can feel threatening if held too long. These multi-person screens magnify this exhausting problem and challenges the brain to decode so many people at once that no one comes through meaningfully.

**Cognitive load.** In real life situations, non-verbal communication flows naturally as we are unconscious about our gestures or other effortless and paradoxically complex nonverbal cues. However, in the virtual world of Zoom, the nonverbal behavior is difficult to decipher, and users are forced to work harder to send and receive these signals. In effect, humans have taken one of the most natural things in the world – an in-person conversation – and transformed it into something that involves a lot of thought, such as if we want to show someone that we agree with them, we would have to do an exaggerated nod or put our thumbs up. This adds cognitive load, because we end up using calories in order to communicate.

**All day mirror.** The effect of seeing oneself in a mirror has been studied for decades, showing that people tend to evaluate themselves when seeing a mirror image. This situation leads to more prosocial behavior, but the self-evaluation can be stressful, and studies have showed that it has a negative effect.

**Reduced mobility.** During face-to-face meetings people move, pace, stand-up, or stretch, while in computer-mediated meetings they are forced to sit in view of the camera which tampers down movement. Some studies show that locomotion and other movements cause better performance in meetings.

Videoconferencing is an amazing robust communication tool, but this computer-mediated interface is more taxing for the brain which causes psychological consequences and fatigue.

### Hence, the question arises, how can we combat these issues to improve the productivity of a virtual meeting?

1. Schedule video calls only if it is absolutely necessary and switch it to phone calls or emails.
2. In order to reduce the on-screen stimuli, one can try to reduce the size of the video window relative to the monitor to minimize face size, and distance oneself from the screen.
3. During long stretches of meetings, switch the camera off and try to take a break from not only having to be nonverbally active, but also to move around for a nonverbal rest. Walking meetings are known to improve creativity and reduce stress as well.

Videoconferencing is likely here to stay, thus it is important to consider ways that you can keep up with your work and center your own wellness.

#### Resources:

1. <https://vhil.stanford.edu/>
2. Vignesh Ramachandran, *Stanford researchers identify four causes for 'Zoom fatigue' and their simple fixes*, Stanford News
3. Liz Fosslien, Mollie West Duffy, *How to Combat Zoom Fatigue*, Harvard Business Review



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**Q. What motivates you?**

Being able to contribute to the process of drug discovery by developing medicines that one day might help alleviate the burden on patients and their families living with deadly diseases is what motivates me to give my best every day.

**Q. How do you handle stress that comes with your job, if any?**

Find ways outside of work that provide me relaxation and perspective about the important things in life besides work. Also, setting boundaries and turning "off" from work at a healthy time and not constantly checking/responding to emails past this hour, unless urgent matters are at hand. Of course, this is an ideal scenario, and a lot depends on the kind of team and manager you work for. I have been lucky in both my industry jobs to work for companies and managers that valued work-life balance.

**Q. What was the last book that you read?**

Dune by Frank Herbert. It took a while to get through it but was exactly the kind of escape I needed during the pandemic –to be transported into the political feud on the fictional planet of Arrakis rather than constantly focus on the goings-on of our very own planet in the last year!

**Q. What piece of advice would you give to postdoctoral researchers considering a transition into an industry position at the current state of the job market?**

Don't be limited by the traditional career journey of PhD -> postdoc -> tenure-track research or even bench research in general. It's okay if you like this path, but it's also OKAY if this is not the fit for you. Introspect to understand what aspect of your routine/skillset you enjoy the most and try to explore careers centered around it. The job market will always have its ups and downs, but if you have clarity in what you want to do, the strategy will remain the same for the most part. There are numerous companies looking for talented PhDs like yourself. Start with using the right tools such as resume-building, networking, LinkedIn etc. such that it is clear why you are the best person for that job.

Ultimately, the closer one gets to doing something which they excel at and at the same time get pleasure in pursuing, I believe one can hope to achieve long term professional and personal satisfaction.