

CHAPTER 3: **A**CADEMIC CAREER AS AN ODYSSEY: ALLEGORIES FROM THE WORK OF HOMER AND PERSONAL EXPERIENCES IN MODERN GREECE¹

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The chapter proposes to discuss the challenges, risks and pitfalls, as well as rewards, opportunities and benefits of an academic career in management. It is inspired by the analogies between academic career as experienced by the author over the last 15 years and the Odyssey epic poem. The chapter will focus on the following analogies between the academic career and Homer's epos: (1) Obstacles and Enablers (2) Companions and Critical allies (3) Destination and Journey. In each of the 3 parts, personal experiences of the author are presented and the analogies or antitheses with the classic epic poem are discussed.

Definition of odyssey (Merriam Webster dictionary)

1 : a long wandering or voyage usually marked by many changes of fortune (e.g. “his odyssey from rural South to urban North, from poverty to affluence, from Afro-American folk culture to a Eurocentric world of books”)

2 : an intellectual or spiritual wandering or quest (e.g. “ an odyssey of self-discovery”, “a spiritual odyssey from disbelief to faith”)

The Odyssey is one of the two major ancient Greek epic poems attributed to Homer. It is, in part, a sequel to the Iliad, the other work ascribed to Homer. The poem mainly focuses on the Greek hero Odysseus (known as Ulysses in Roman myths), king of Ithaca, and his journey home after the fall of Troy. It takes Odysseus another ten years to reach Ithaca after the ten-year Trojan War. During his absence, it is assumed that Odysseus has died, and his wife Penelope and son Telemachus must deal with a group of unruly suitors (the Suitors, also known as Mnesteres or Proci), who compete for Penelope's hand in marriage. Meanwhile, Odysseus is wandering around the Aegean Sea and further down to Italy and the “land of the dead”. He is

¹ This is a draft chapter / article. The final version will be available in *Becoming an Organizational Scholar: Navigating the Academic Odyssey* edited by Tomislav HERNAS and Matej ČERNE, forthcoming 2020, Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd

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chased after Poseidon, god of the sea, who seeks revenge because Odysseus blinded his son, the Cyclops Polyphemus.

In this chapter, I am inspired by Homer's *Odyssey* and attempt to find analogies and antitheses between the original epos and the odyssey of academic life, as I experienced it myself, in the Greek academia. I should let the reader know that I am currently in the middle of my career (14 years after my PhD) and hold a tenured post of Assistant Professor in Organizational Behavior at the Athens University of Economics and Business. I also am happily married and a mother of three wonderful kids and I am convinced that my family is both my anchor and sails in my journey, for which I am grateful.

Obstacles and Enablers

The unknown and unpredictable

All the events in *Odyssey* are unknown and unpredictable. Odysseus himself is found in so many unknown places in ways he could not have predicted (Ismaros, the land of the Cicones, the Lotus-Eaters, the Cyclops Polyphemus, Aeolus with his winds, the cannibalistic Laestrygonians, the witch-goddess Circe, the land of the dead, the Sirens, Calypso's island, the six-headed monster Scylla and the whirlpool Charybdis are the most characteristic ones). None of them was expected or according to schedule. In an academic career, a junior academic expects that her career will be a well-planned course, following specific milestones: doctoral research, writing of thesis, defense, presentations in conferences, writing of papers and submission to journals (aiming first at those with higher rankings and, if not feasible, contending with lower-ranking ones), acquiring teaching experience, filing for a job, pursuing tenure and development, etc.

My personal experience does not agree with this lineal, milestone-related development. A list of indicative unexpected events (both positive and negative) follows:

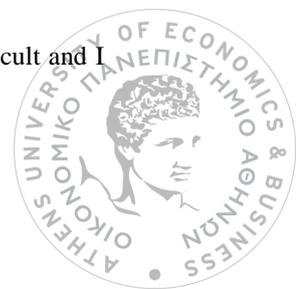
- Delays in data collection: I hardly know of any social researcher who hasn't experienced any delay in data collection. For me the most telling example was the collection of questionnaires for my PhD. I had to complete 100 questionnaires, which, given the nature of the data, had to be completed through interview (either by phone or, in most cases, face-to-face, at the interviewee's office). The respondents were the most senior person in the HRM department of each organization contacted, so reaching an agreement for a visit or phone interview was already a challenge and I expected it. What was a surprise to me, was the high ratio of annulments and the need to reschedule meetings, when all my days were already committed. Almost half of the originally scheduled interviews eventually were rescheduled. I still remember vividly the sense of accomplishment that I felt on the days that I managed to complete 2 on-site interviews



(my personal record was 4 interviews in a day). I had predicted that data collection would last up to six months. Finally, I managed to complete the process in almost a year... It was frustrating and time-consuming. At the same time, it was one of the most valuable experiences in my studies: I visited so many companies and discussed with experienced HR professionals from different industry sectors on my topic that I still use examples in my HRM classes. Plus, working in a small country and market, I still meet and have contacts with some of the interviewees and I am more able to speak their language² when I collaborate with practitioners during a consulting project or other occasion.

- Delays in the review processes: I know no one who has not experienced unexpected delays during the review process of their work. It is common, even at the highest ranked journals, which usually have a quick turnaround time. My latest such experiences proved that this is usually related with the lack of reviewers. An editor who does not desk reject immediately but delays in assigning reviewers is interested in your work and he/she may take longer than expected to find adequate reviewers. My current publishing strategy is to always cite all the relevant papers that have been published in the targeted journal, not only because this is necessary for a comprehensive literature review, but also to ease the work of the editor who will be searching for relevant reviewers. I must admit that, despite my strategy, I still get delays in the review process.
- Unavailability of examiners: I've experienced this every time that I needed to finalize the date for a formal examination/evaluation (for the PhD defense, for applications in every post I have filed for and during development evaluations). The larger the committee, the most difficult to arrange for them to meet. Applications like doodle have considerably eased the process in comparison to 10 years earlier, but even in my latest evaluation for development, in 2018, when a committee of a dozen professors needed to reach quorum, it was quite a challenge to find the right date. Practically this is a task that – at least in my county – the applicants bear, because they have the interest to speed up the process.
- Invitation of papers and chapters: At some point in one's career, you start being invited to submit your work. This is obviously an honor. It is also an opportunity to update and present work that you don't consider fit for the highest ranked journals. For me, such invitations allow me to foster my networks, to increase the visibility of my work and sometimes even to come back and utilize works that I considered complete. Pay attention to invitations by publications that charge fees or editing expenses. Usually they don't have any academic merit. I only reply to invitations from academics whom I know

² More than before, because the communication of academics with practitioners is, by definition, difficult and I fear I am not an exception.



and respect. This safeguards the quality of the produced overall output to which my work will form part.

Obstacles that become enablers: Calypso/Ogygia

In Homer's *Odyssey*, book 5, it is described how Odysseus finds shelter at the island Ogygia, where the nymph Calypso lives. He stays with her for 7 years as a prisoner, because she wants to keep him on her island to make him her immortal husband. Odysseus can no longer bear being separated from his wife Penelope and his patron goddess Athena asks Zeus to order Calypso to release Odysseus from the island, so eventually Calypso concedes, sending Odysseus on his way after providing him with wine, bread, and the materials for a raft. She also gives him useful tips on the route and on how he should sail, on the dangers that he should avoid, etc. This is a recurring theme in Homer's *Odyssey*: the former obstacles or enemies often become enablers or allies and vice-versa. In the academic career, it is also common for the past obstacles to become enablers. I'll give an example.

“Someone conducting a research similar to mine”: It sounds as the typical nightmare for a researcher. You completed your paper and when you are ready to submit it for publication to your targeted journal, a paper with similar hypotheses, data, methodology is published. Where will you publish, and which will be the contribution of your paper? This is indeed an unpredictable situation which might occur from time to time. There is a wonderful aspect in it, though: your topic is currently popular and papers similar to yours do get published in the journal of your choice. The key message here is to continue working on it to turn it to an opportunity³. You'll need to devote considerable effort in changing (in order of importance) the conceptualization (1), the research questions (2) and the methods (3) of your work, in a way that it adds to the already published work. Your chances of acceptance to the journal are much higher when it has published similar articles, thus showing interest for your topic of research.

Companions and Critical allies

Odysseus, throughout his adventures and wandering, has almost always had characters who supported and helped him. This is true for almost everything one accomplishes. Even if we tend

³ This has happened to me a couple of times, but I cannot recite them all, as some involve other people who may not agree with mine mentioning our story. I can share the example of my latest paper “Effects of employee benefits on affective and continuance commitment during times of crisis”, though, recently published at the *International Journal of Manpower*. During the literature review for this project, I had missed a 2010 article by Benjamin Artz, named “Fringe benefits and job satisfaction”, in the same journal. When I later identified it, I had already written my first draft, which, at the time, had both organizational commitment and job satisfaction as dependent variables. I had to rework the paper in a way that it would contribute to the open discussion that Artz had opened, so work a lot on rewriting it. But the discussion was already there, open for my paper to participate in it.



to believe that the academic life is a very lonely one, the success of academics is not a one-man-show. To begin with, by definition, research and teaching, the main pillars of academic function, are based on knowledge that previous researchers have developed. Therefore, in a very broad sense, academics have as companions and allies the older academics who have advanced our knowledge in a way that our current research is meaningful. As Isaac Newton put it in his famous quote: “If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants”.

Apart from the theoretical allies, however, there are numerous people who will become your allies and companions in your academic life.

Athena – Mentor

In the *Odyssey* epos, the most critical ally for Odysseus is Athena, the wisdom goddess who repeatedly protects Odysseus and helps him return home. The most telling example of Athena’s intervention is when, during the absence of Odysseus, she takes the appearance of *Mentes* (Mentor), a friend of Odysseus and she meets Telemachus, Odysseus’s son in order to advise him how to deal with the suitors. In fact, this is the provenance of the term “mentoring”, i.e. the act of giving advice and helping younger people to develop their potential and succeed⁴. I mentioned the story of Mentor, because the most valuable allies that any academic has are her mentors. The first and obvious mentor is usually the doctoral supervisor. There may be other mentors and role models in one’s career, but the doctoral supervisor is the most critical. I was blessed to have Professor Nancy Papalexandris (I hope that she doesn’t mind mine mentioning her name here) for my supervisor. She was a very good mentor, not only because as a Professor, when I first collaborated with her, she was very successful and renowned for her research on HRM and OB in Greece. What really made her a great supervisor was her drive to improve things and accomplish even further achievements (even after her retirement she is one of the most active academics I know), her willingness to develop people around her and leave them room to cultivate their skills and maximize their potential, her honest concern at a personal level for people, as well as her clear judgement and composure, rooted on a long-term experience in academia and a steady code of ethics. These “soft skills” of my supervisor were crucial for my development, even more than her scientific and technical knowledge. I am convinced that the choice of the supervisor is one of the first but also the most critical career choice in academia. As with mentoring in general, the key for a good supervision is for the supervisor to honestly wish for the development of the young researcher.

⁴ Specifically, the definition of mentor (Merriam Webster dictionary is:
1 [capitalized]: a friend of Odysseus entrusted with the education of Odysseus' son Telemachus
2a : a trusted counselor or guide
2b : tutor, coach (Merriam Webster dictionary)



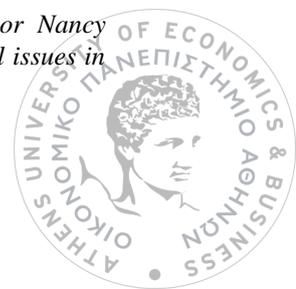
I still recall a joke that we used to share with my colleagues at the Hellenic Association of Doctoral Researchers, a group that we founded in 2003 with other Greek doctoral candidates and which unfortunately, to the best of my knowledge, is not active anymore. Allow me to share the joke here, as it underlines the role of the supervisor/mentor in academic research: *In the middle of the forest, on a sunny day, the Wolf meets the Rabbit. The Rabbit has gathered loads of papers in front of him on a rock and writes incessantly. At the question of the Wolf on what he is writing with such diligence, the Rabbit answers: “my doctoral thesis”. The Wolf asks what’s the topic of the thesis and the Rabbit answers “The superiority of herbivores over carnivores”. At the mocking laughter of the Wolf over the ridiculousness of the topic, the Rabbit challenges him that he can prove it and invites the Wolf to escort him in a nearby cave. In a few minutes the Wolf is seen running away, wounded and full of scratches. The same scenario is repeated with almost all carnivore animals that passed by the Rabbit’s office: they get beaten up when they question the validity of his hypothesis. Later, we see the Rabbit exiting the cave, escorted by the Lion, who is saying “As I was telling you, Rabbit; in a doctorate, the key success factor is the supervisor, not the topic”.* I recall with fond memories the laughs that we shared with my fellow doctoral candidates at the impotency of carnivores to defend their conviction/base hypothesis in the face of the potent supervisor of the Rabbit.

I was lucky to have good Mentors in my career even after the completion of my PhD. In general, I sought to collaborate with people from whom I had something important to learn. Obviously, you learn something from everyone you collaborate with. I am convinced that I learn a lot from my students, for example. However, there are people in each one’s field who can become mentors and it is a joy to collaborate with them in many ways. The question is whether and how we show gratitude for their unselfish giving. Very often we are not able to do so. Recently, with colleagues, also her mentees, we have found a way how to express our indebtedness, i.e., we have decided to co-edit a collective honorary volume of papers published in recognition of Professor Nancy Papalexandris’ contribution to the area of HRM, OB and general management, throughout her academic career.⁵

Phaecians (Nafsika, Arete, Alcinoos)

Odysseus was not only assisted by Gods. He received help from many different individuals, the majority of whom he had never met before. A characteristic example is the reception by the Phaecians, at his last stop in his way to Ithaca. As a castaway he gets washed up on the coast of the island of the Phaecians, where he meets the princess Nafsika, and she takes him to the palace, where he is hosted by her parents, king Alcinoos and queen Arete. They provide him

⁵ Galanaki, E., Nikandrou, I. and Panayotopoulou, L. (eds) (2020). *Volume in honor of professor Nancy Papalexandris: An anthology on Human Resource Management, Organizational Behavior and Special issues in Management*. Athens, Editions Benou, ISBN: 978-960-359-157-3



flawless hospitality and when they learn who he is and his story, they arrange for one of their ships to take him to Ithaca. The behavior of the Phaeacians is indicative of how Homer introduces allies to assist his main hero. The help from them is unexpected, but it is Odysseus who welcomes and asks for it. Odysseus is a character who is open to people around him: he trusts others (taking calculated risks), asks them for help, and makes them participants in the drama. We may call it an Odyssey from the name of the main character, but there are many allies who produce the outcome, i.e. the return to Ithaca.

One of the career strategies that I have been quite consistent in following (mostly because it agrees with my personality) is being open to other people, trust, offer collaboration and help when possible. Generally, this opens a channel of trust and when in need, I am also able to ask for assistance, advice, information etc. Since the beginning of my career I have been involved in several extra and voluntary activities. I have done this without other motivation or hidden agenda, only for the sake of each activity's cause. Now, looking back at them, I realize that each of these activities has allowed me to develop some network, ability, or competence that I had not foreseen. For example, my involvement in the Hellenic Doctoral Researchers' Association, in which I was the first president, allowed me to develop a large network in the Greek academia and a cross-disciplinary thinking, as well as a confidence to pursue representation positions. At the time we were members of the European Doctoral Federation, Eurodoc, where I also served at the Executive Board for one year. I think that this developed my ability to cooperate with people from different countries. In both organizations I contributed as much as I could because I believed in their cause and wanted to contribute. I did not expect more than the cause itself at the time. Years later, when I was offered to run as Greek representative at the European Academy of Management (EURAM- <http://euram-online.org/>), I was happy to take this up and run for the position. It was after the EURAM Conference in Istanbul (2013) where Greeks had reached a record number of participations in comparison to previous years, so a position at EURAM's Executive Board was open for Greece. I had participated in previous EURAM conferences and had appreciated the format and scope of the Academy, so I was willing to contribute to its mission. Right now, I fear that I've taken up too many responsibilities in EURAM, because in addition to the Greek Representative position, I've also assumed the chairing of the General OB track (95 submissions in total in 2019, one of the largest tracks of the conference) and this is much work and responsibility. However, I have come to consider work that you do for your academic field pays off. I am not able to count the outcomes of my EURAM involvement, but I believe that several of the latest opportunities in my career (guest editing positions, invited speeches and chapters to collective volumes) are to a large extent related to it. To sum it up, the Odyssey and my experience agree in this respect: voluntary, extra work and citizenship behavior open channels of collaboration and allows others to reach out for you and possibly assist you when needed.



Destination and Journey

The work of Homer has inspired several modern thinkers, authors and poets. My favorite work is the poem “Ithaca” from a Greek poet, C. P. Cavafy (1863-1933). Allow me to share it with you:

Ithaca

*As you set out for Ithaca
hope your road is a long one,
full of adventure, full of discovery.
Laistrygonians, Cyclops,
angry Poseidon—don't be afraid of them:
you'll never find things like that on your way
as long as you keep your thoughts raised high,
as long as a rare excitement
stirs your spirit and your body.
Laistrygonians, Cyclops,
wild Poseidon—you won't encounter them
unless you bring them along inside your soul,
unless your soul sets them up in front of you.*

*Hope your road is a long one.
May there be many summer mornings when,
with what pleasure, what joy,
you enter harbors you're seeing for the first time;
may you stop at Phoenician trading stations
to buy fine things,
mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,
sensual perfume of every kind—
as many sensual perfumes as you can;
and may you visit many Egyptian cities
to learn and go on learning from their scholars.*

*Keep Ithaca always in your mind.
Arriving there is what you're destined for.
But don't hurry the journey at all.
Better if it lasts for years,
so you're old by the time you reach the island,*



*wealthy with all you've gained on the way,
not expecting Ithaca to make you rich.*

*Ithaca gave you the marvelous journey.
Without her you wouldn't have set out.
She has nothing left to give you now.*

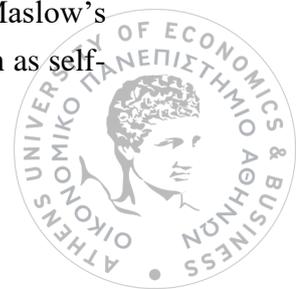
*And if you find her poor, Ithaca won't have fooled you.
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
you'll have understood by then what these Ithacas mean.*

Source: Cavafy, C. P. (1975) *Collected Poems*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

I set this work apart because it expresses in the best possible way the feeling that in *Odyssey* the most important aspect is the journey itself rather than the destination. The journey is a learning process that evolves and develops constantly. Homer does not seem to care much about describing Ithaca or the years that Odysseus spent with his family after his return home. As in all fiction, the journey is far more interesting than the outcome of it or the final destiny of the main character.

In a similar vein, in an academic career, one's CV is dominated by achievements and learning opportunities that have enabled her to develop Knowledge, Skill, Ability, and Other personal characteristics (KSAOs). Obviously, good posts and tenure in well-known universities is an intended destination for most junior academics. However, alternative career outcomes may also define the success of the journey. I have met so many business researchers who, after completing their doctoral studies, decided that academic career would not be ideal for them. Working for the industry, in managerial or consulting positions can be a success for many of us who efficiently utilize their KSAOs in business-led targets. And actually, these people are best equipped to address the long-sought for calls for a more evidence-based management in action (Reay et al., 2009), as they have largely developed KSAOs in running research and evaluating research outcomes during their early academic experience. I also know of academics, mothers and fathers, who have developed great parenting potential as a result of a long learning and teaching experience. In their case, the journey has allowed them to develop skills that can be utilized effectively in their family life.

On the other hand, people in academia share a common benefit: our career is a constant and never-ending learning experience. Learning is our core business and as described in Kavafis' *Ithaca*, learning, trying and experimenting, per se, constitute a self-satisfying process. We have the benefit of constantly satisfying our self-actualization needs (according to Maslow's hierarchy of needs; Maslow, 1943) through our work. Further, more basic needs (such as self-



esteem, physiologic and safety needs) are also satisfied to a large extent with our work, regardless of our career outcome (post, promotion, etc.). Few professions can convincingly claim the same. The only human need that an academic career seems to fail to meet is the love and belonging one. Even if academic teachers constantly interact with their students during teaching, our journey can be a very lonely one. Relations with other people are finite in time, depending on the duration of a course (students), a research project (colleague academics) or a consulting project (business clients). Moreover, most of our work is conducted in isolation, for e.g. writing, performing analyses, preparing material, studying. It is a lonely road, but well-worth and rewarding.

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