

Women on the edge: Workplace stress at universities in North America

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Key Messages

- There is an important, under-explored relationship between deteriorating work conditions in the neoliberal university and the deteriorating well-being and health of women working at universities.
- Women faculty struggle with fertility, mental health and well-being, and other physical manifestations of stress.
- There are many strategies that universities, departments, and individuals can pursue to improve work conditions for all university faculty.

This article analyzes findings of semi-structured interviews with 21 women at different stages of academic careers in North America. I argue that work conditions in contemporary universities subject women graduate students and faculty members to high levels of stress such that work exacts an unsustainable toll on women's bodies, making "getting through the day" a priority. Themes include work conditions; gendered experiences of stress, health, fertility, and well-being; and efforts to balance work and life. Participants spoke of the disappearance of healthy ways of working and living, isolation, and burnout. Technology combined with increasing workloads to erase boundaries around work. Workday and workplace became ambiguous, work itself ubiquitous and all-encompassing. In addition to discussing the experiences of women scholars and their workplaces, I discuss strategies for improvement.

Keywords: neoliberal university, gender, work conditions, geography, stress

Les femmes à bout de nerfs : le stress au travail dans les universités d'Amérique du Nord

Cet article présente une analyse des faits tirés d'entrevues semi-dirigées menées auprès de 21 femmes à différentes étapes de leur carrière universitaire en Amérique du Nord. Je fais valoir que les conditions de travail actuelles des étudiantes des cycles supérieurs et des professeures universitaires génèrent des niveaux de stress tellement élevés que travailler pèse lourdement sur le corps des femmes, de sorte que la priorité consiste à « réussir à finir sa journée ». Les conditions de travail, les différences de genre dans la réponse au stress, la santé, la fertilité, le bien-être, et les efforts de conciliation travail-vie privée comptent parmi les sujets traités. Les participantes ont évoqué des modes de vie et de travail favorables à la santé devenus inatteignables, ainsi que les effets de l'isolement et de l'épuisement professionnel. Les dispositifs technologiques et des charges de travail accrues contribuent à estomper les frontières du monde du travail. Une ambiguïté entre l'horaire et le lieu de travail s'est installée, étant donné que le travail est devenu omniprésent et englobe tout. Outre l'examen des expériences des femmes universitaires et de leurs lieux de travail, j'aborde plus directement des stratégies pour apporter des améliorations.

Mots clés : université néolibérale, genre, conditions de travail, géographie, stress

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There is general agreement within literature on universities as places of work that workplace conditions have been deteriorating in recent years (e.g., Meyerhoff et al. 2011; Curtis 2014). There is also an extensive literature on the gendering of these workplace conditions, particularly as university faculty members negotiate greater workloads and intensified audit cultures (MIT 1999; Cox et al. 2012). Within this literature, there are proliferating observations in the form of blogs, scholarship, and newspaper articles that these environments are destructive to people, and that they are destructive in particular ways to women (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al. 2012; Green 2015). This last point—the destruction of women—is the focus of this article.

During my 13 years on faculty, I have noticed a gradual increase in the number of faculty members and students talking about pharmaceuticals, including anti-depressants and anti-anxiety medications: Xanax, Ativan, and migraine pills taken to get by. I am not alone in these observations (Mountz et al. 2015; Peake and Mullings, forthcoming).

Like everyone, I have experienced challenges at work. In 2006, three years into my six-year march to tenure, I became ill, immobilized by pain and confined to bed. Pain shrinks your world to a very small area. I disappeared from my workplace. While isolated, I contended with the general lack of acknowledgement of my own disappearance. Getting sick helped me to understand life and work in new ways. I wanted to be well and knew that this required change. I recognized toxic characteristics of my work, by which I refer to people, behaviours, and daily practices that cause negativity in others (see Housman and Minor 2015 on “toxic workers”). I began to explore the relationship between health and work. While not sure of their precise relationship, I knew that I was living their intimate intersections.

As I healed, I started interviewing women about their experiences of work, life, health, and the intersections between these external and interior worlds as *they* understood them. I started gathering the data presented here as a process of healing, exploration, and work toward change. I began by interviewing colleagues I knew, and used the snowball method wherein participants recommend other potential participants whom they knew. There was not a “general call” for participants; instead, I found people through word of mouth and personal and professional networks. Criteria for inclusion in

the study were limited to people who identified as women, were interested enough in these issues to be interviewed, and were based at universities in North America (because universities in other regions may be changing in other ways or at a different pace).¹

From 2006 to 2011, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 21 women at different stages of academic careers. Respondents ranged in age from mid-twenties to early sixties and in career stage from finishing doctoral students to full professors. The shortest interview lasted 45 minutes, the longest three hours (recorded over two visits). The discipline of geography serves as one reference point because it is where I am trained and housed. Existing scholarship details the discipline’s history as one that devalued and discouraged women and women of colour (Rose 1993; Pulido 2001; Mahtani 2002). But participants occupied a range of fields in the social sciences, including geography, political science, environmental studies, history, anthropology, and architecture.

Most interviews transpired outside of the workplace, although two were held in offices for scheduling convenience. All were recorded digitally, transcribed, and coded. The author conducted most interviews, although Lisa Bhungalia conducted three as (then) Research Assistant. Interview questions addressed work conditions, different career stages and transitions, and the relationship between professional and personal life. Participants were asked at the beginning of interviews to explain how they self-identified, without prompts. Respondents identified as queer, gay, straight, working class, white, women of colour, feminists, students, post-doctoral fellows, and professors.

Participants spoke of the disappearance of healthy ways of working and living in relation to work. Themes include workload, work conditions, stress, health, well-being, and the precarious balance between work and home life. Many experienced isolation and burnout. I argue that the conditions of labour in the contemporary university subject women to such high levels of stress that work exacts an unsustainable toll on their bodies, making “getting through the day” a priority.

¹Names and identifying characteristics have been suppressed in accordance with anonymity agreements made during the research. My university ethics board did not require written consent from people speaking in a professional capacity.

I did not interview men, although they too experience stress in ways that surely parallel and diverge from women's experiences. There is also important work to be done on men's experiences of stress. I began with women because I am one and because I witnessed them carrying burdens that were making them ill. Too many women were suffering in isolation, and I wanted to know why. I have also witnessed some of the ways that my male colleagues contend with the tremendous pressure to perform, and wonder if these pressures might prove more difficult at times because constructions of masculinity may preclude more discussion of their experiences. For better and for worse, women are essentialized as people with whom to discuss health issues. In her recent essay "Thanks for Listening," Green (2015) estimates that someone cries in her office "at least once every three weeks." She notes that she is not trained as therapist or social worker and is not chair of her department, but "I'm a female professor at a research university, where faculty members and students—especially graduate students—regularly show up at my office, often after sending me a vague email asking if I have time to talk. And then they tell me things." This has been a common experience for me, and female colleagues and I have spoken often about keeping tissues in our offices for these occasions. Green goes on to depict the kinds of conversations that ensue as "private," "confidential," and "the underbelly of that work"—by which she means academic work, career strategies, and socialization into the academy. Green (a pseudonym) notes that while "a few women colleagues nod their heads knowingly" when she speaks of the tissue box kept on her desk, "many professors act baffled: Why would someone cry in your office? Men in particular say that."

Female professors often experience and find themselves exposed disproportionately to this underbelly work or what Hochschild (1983) called "emotional labour," due in part to gendered constructions of women as nice, friendly, caring—as those who in fact do a disproportionate amount of care work in the university. This project largely emerged from the preponderance of these kinds of conversations; it involved a desire to expose how much people—and especially women—were suffering, but not able to share this suffering in public ways.

The project began at a time when I found myself discussing these issues with some frequency. As

friends and colleagues struggled, and as I struggled, these conversations became important and necessary for survival. Audre Lorde (1988) and Sara Ahmed (2014) write about "self-care as warfare." I found myself engaged in these conversations, and found that they helped: that finding ways to discuss overwhelming stress and health struggles made me realize that many people around me were experiencing similar things. There was relief and hope in and for something bigger; there was power in forging the collective. The process was one where conversations evolved into interviews as I explained the project. I put tools of social science, friendship, and the power of conversation into the healing process.

While I do not want to essentialize the category of woman, the experiences of women, or their ways of engaging each other, I have found that conversations about these issues seem to happen more often—for me—with other women. In the time since co-authoring an essay called "For Slow Scholarship" (Mountz et al. 2015) however, I have had the opportunity to learn from more men about how these issues affect them. In the future, I would conduct research with everyone interested in discussing these issues in order to understand their gendering more fully.

I am not trained in autobiography or autoethnography as methods; this article does not claim to use these methods. On occasion, I do share my own experiences in this article. Some find this a claim to legitimacy and power. For me, including my own experiences is a political act. I identify with those whose stories are shared here. I share many of their experiences—albeit in different ways for every person—and want to locate my own subject position. I do so as a form of situated knowledge, acknowledging that this is—like all knowledge construction—a "view from somewhere" (Haraway 1991).

I proceed with a brief discussion of existing literature. I then present and discuss findings, strategies for change, and conclusions that explore implications and questions raised by this work.

Setting the scene: Working in the contemporary university

In environments that privilege endurance and hard work, there is little space for discussion of ailments, burnout, and breaking points. As a result, people

often suffer alone, silent, afraid to speak of fears and frailties.

And yet changes to university work cultures and their gendered effects have been well documented (Butterwick and Dawson 2005; Reevy and Deason 2014). In this literature, neoliberalism's shaping of the university is significant, demonstrated in discussion of audit and efficiency cultures that devolve more work with less support to instructors. Within this context, time emerges as a significant terrain for struggle with work-life balance (Meyerhoff et al. 2011; Hartman and Darab 2012; Berg et al. 2016, this issue).

Work ethics and habits are intense in academic settings, characterized increasingly by various metric regimes and counting cultures, with ever-rising expectations and associated workloads. By metric regimes and counting cultures, I refer to a well-documented phenomenon wherein accounting begins to influence not only *how* work is done, but *what* work is done. When institutional subject-making and norms of ideal workloads unfold in the context of ritualized counting exercises, work that can be included in empirical counting models may take precedence over work that cannot easily be counted (see Butterwick and Dawson 2005). Many have written about the destructive effects of measurements that assign value to different forms of academic work and tend to prioritize products and outcomes (e.g., publications and grants) over process (Butterwick and Dawson 2005). It becomes difficult to remember what is important, personally and professionally. Butterwick and Dawson (2005, 51) liken this experience to standing on the deck of a ship at sea, never quite finding one's balance.

One participant in this project referred to "the ideal worker," and her elaboration captures many of the aspects associated with trends in neoliberal changes to work. For example, accompanying the drive to document productivity through measurement is the expectation that workers will be able to do more and more over time, with less support. This doing-more-with-less assumes that workers can work longer hours, or else somehow create additional time in their day (Meyerhoff et al. 2011; Mountz et al. 2015). Or, that the work day can continue to expand, leaving less time for care-work for family and self outside of working hours. The imagined "ideal worker" is, therefore, able to perform long hours physically and emotionally

and unencumbered by "outside demands" like family or personal needs. She is highly efficient and able to operate on sparse amounts of sleep or nourishment. This ideal worker becomes an imagined standard against which we frame ourselves or imagine ourselves framed.

Shifts in academic work cultures and expectations affect different people in different ways. This article focuses on women as a group differentially affected, but they are a heterogeneous group as well. Scholars have documented the destructive effects of university culture on black feminists (Cox et al. 2012), women of colour (Pulido 2001; Mahtani 2002; Gutiérrez y Muhs et al. 2012), lesbians (Valentine 1998), and women seeking accommodation (Chouinard 2010). From inequities accumulated over the course of a career (MIT 1999) to microaggressions experienced daily (Sue 2010), women bear the burden of unsustainable pressures, stresses, and discrimination in universities. This does not necessarily mean that they bear an empirically greater burden, but that their burden intersects with or is exacerbated by experiences of patriarchy, sexism, racism, and so on.

I embarked on this project because not enough work documented the embodied experiences of destructive work conditions. As Peake and Mullings (forthcoming) observe, academics "rarely explore the changing nature of knowledge production within their own institutions and its impact on mental health and wellness." While not my primary focus, the relationship between mental health and well-being is threatened by the work-life imbalance and associated conditions detailed here. As such, this study can be seen as a precursor, setting the stage for mental health struggles detailed in this issue. Healthy work environments produce better conditions for better mental health; the reverse is also true.

Findings

In interviewing women at different stages of their lives and careers, I ordered some 25 interview questions to follow career stages, from graduate school to the present. Findings—also presented in this order—demonstrate socialization, subject formation, and change over time. Questions explored themes such as graduate school, transitions to different career phases, health, and stress.

Graduate school: Ideal workers take shape

Hawkins and co-authors (2014) locate graduate school as a formative time when academic subjectivities are shaped and students are introduced to unsustainable workloads, competition, and individualization—and associated forms of alienation. By alienation, I refer in part to feelings of isolation and failure: the oft-repeated sense that everyone else in a work environment can succeed in conforming to normative expectations of the ideal worker, but that oneself alone falls short. By individualization, I mean the tendency to think that one is the only person experiencing these issues, and also somewhat responsible for them; this issue of individualization was a major motivator in my research. Respondents in this study identified graduate school as the time when they first learned extreme ways of working in an effort to overcome these feelings. These included stories of self-abuse of the body shared by participants in my research.

During graduate school, women learned to push themselves to limits and discover what they could accomplish (and often faced personal crises along the way). A few mentioned comprehensive exams as moments when these lessons were learned. One graduate student recounted an associated breakdown: “I had a nervous breakdown, ended up in the hospital, lost 30 pounds. Later, I binged: smoking, drinking, everything” (Doctoral student, Canada, 2007). Another doctoral student describes this time:

When I started a PhD program, things got way more intense. That, for me, was where the ever higher hurdles came . . . There were all these expectations . . . Folks were writing fifty-page qualifying exams on each of their three questions, and it was all about size and it was a very kind of machismo model. I got to the end of it, and thought, “Wow, I never thought I could work that hard. This opens up a whole new realm of possibility” . . . I mean, it was rough, but I could push myself this hard and I can still function. This is just going to make a new level of efficiency for my day. That really started what just got magnified when I came [to my first job], that ability to work at a very intense level (Assistant Professor, U.S., 2006).

Another student discussed exams: “That’s where a lot of the competitiveness of grad school came out, which in retrospect was more present in the classes

in my early years than I think I realized at the time” (Doctoral student, Canada, 2006). She then explained how this competitiveness became ingrained in excessive work habits:

It’s certainly, the [exam] process . . . the whole kind of Foucauldian framework of putting yourself through this utterly bizarre process of kind of unrelenting pressure to write more, read more, perform more. So definitely that was where the competitive thing came out, and I was starting to see that in myself . . . That’s what everyone goes there to do: be fabulous and brilliant and somehow achieve this great thing (Doctoral student, Canada, 2006).

This respondent subsequently, in the interview, traced these pressures and practices among graduate students into her observations of faculty members and their work habits, including forms of self-denial and lack of self-care.

Another woman described how she learned denial of self-care:

In graduate school, even with a sort of rhetoric you know to be healthy and have a normal life, there’s an unspoken, there’s sort of an implicit reward for a particular willingness to sell your soul, to do what you do at all costs and to prove repeatedly that you can sort of slice off all those messy aspects of your life. . . . It’s built into the system that particular kinds of behaviours get rewarded and in the process we self-select for particular kinds of people who have that ability—when lives fall apart—to put the blinders on and push through (Assistant Professor, U.S., 2006).

I asked this participant to identify “messy aspects.” She responded: “I think the messy bits are anything that complicates the kind of trajectory we’re on, so having a personal life, having relationships, having less productive times in your life, anything that sort of doesn’t make you that ideal worker.”

As this Darwinian narrative of self-selection demonstrates, graduate school proved a time when women were socialized into practices and subjectivities that continued throughout their careers. This participant believed that ideal workers will self-select and succeed in the professoriate. Associated behaviours included competition, “the willingness to sell your soul,” “slice off the messy aspects of your life,” and “push through.”

Ever-growing workloads

Having formed ideal worker subjectivities and practices by pushing limits in graduate school, women then experienced the intensification of expectations in their shift to first jobs on faculty, whether limited-term contracts or tenure-track positions. Expectations set for unencumbered workers made work-life balance more challenging as workloads grew, becoming more unsustainable—what Schuurman (2009, 308) calls the “culture of overwork in the academy.” One participant characterized the intensification of work in the transition from graduate school to faculty:

Tenure exacerbates what’s already there . . . I did all these things, so now the bar has been set. If I don’t meet and/or exceed that, then I’m a failure. So it’s not enough to publish as a graduate student, you have to publish in the top journals. And it’s not enough to have your class double in size, you have to have more. And so it’s not enough to get this grant, you want that one. So it’s sort of constant. The bar constantly goes up. There’s no sense of resting. I mean, it’s just higher and higher (Assistant Professor, U.S., 2006).

Even when life crumbles under this pressure, idealized workers attempt to compartmentalize problems and keep going. When asked what behaviours learned in graduate school looked like over time, one assistant professor responded:

It’s the willingness to put your career above everything else . . . for family holidays, you have your laptop out working the entire time; it’s not unacceptable that you have email on all the time . . . There’s a performative element . . . It’s also the ability to say, you know my personal life is falling apart . . . but the show goes on at all costs. I’ll teach when I’m sick; I’ll teach when things are in shambles. None of this will bleed into what I do. Now when I go home, and life is devastating. . . it’s sort of an implicit thing—that’s what the system rewards: an ability to really compartmentalize your life (Assistant Professor, U.S., 2006).

But some people become so sick that they cannot teach. Life does “bleed” into work. Things fall apart. Everyone struggles, but not necessarily in the same way or for the same reasons. And not everyone discusses or is able to discuss these struggles. This silence around the struggle reinforces the notion of the ideal worker.

Fluidity of work times and places

Participants spoke often of the disappearance of healthy ways of working and living in relation to work. Many confronted isolation and burnout. As one woman said, “Nothing about my job is about education. It’s about surviving. It’s about getting through the day” (Assistant Professor, U.S., 2006).

Contributing to burnout was the struggle to leave work at work. Women reported that work-related stress followed them home, creeping into personal life. This fluidity emerges in part from technological developments that enable extension of the places and times of work, which arose in most interviews. Technology such as email and social media combine with increasing workloads to erase boundaries around work (see Schuurman 2009). Workday and workplace become ambiguous, work itself ubiquitous and all-encompassing in daily life. Wireless technology and smart phones make it possible to work or find out about work any time, anywhere. These challenges are not unique to university workplaces; organizational scholarship identifies more broadly the feeling of being inundated and overwhelmed by information made available through new technologies as one form of “technostress” (Tarafdar et al. 2007, 303).

Technology and email often emerged in response to the question about the times and places of work. One assistant professor, partnered with another academic, explained their decision to not use laptops at home: “We have a home study [with a desktop computer], and we don’t have a laptop at home. . . That’s the only room I check email in, and I don’t go to the study if I don’t work” (Assistant Professor, Canada, 2007). Another assistant professor said, “That’s why I’ve been resistant to wireless, actually, at home, because I don’t want it to follow me all over the house” (Assistant Professor, U.S., 2007). This assumption of work happening not only at home, but in certain rooms within the home, reveals an intense struggle to compartmentalize and draw boundaries around times and places of work.

I asked participants to approximate hours worked on average per day and week, as well as the location of her workplace. Responses conveyed the fluidity of the workplace, with work seeping into personal space and time. Many found it difficult to answer, fumbling orally and with body language in response. Some participants gave proud answers that alarmed me, such as working 12-hour days.

Another assistant professor's answer encapsulated workplace fluidity: "You're looking at my workplace. I am my workplace" (Assistant Professor, U.S., 2006). This notion of body as workplace challenges *any* divisions between work and self, professional and personal life. If our bodies *are* our workplaces, what chance do we have to protect ourselves from toxic environs or work issues? How do toxic workscapes affect our well-being? How do we keep this toxicity from entering the body? Can we?

Gender and sexism

Masculinist work cultures also emerged as a frequent topic, including issues such as individualized competition and performance metrics that rewarded and exacerbated self-promotion. Participants relayed experiences of sexism and gendered behaviours and encounters in the workplace. These ranged from more subtle issues—lack of recognition, respect, and equal opportunity—to intolerable episodes. One assistant professor initially denied tenure by her department was later granted tenure by a university-wide committee. She attributed the rejection to sexism: the gendering of her embodiment, her work, and her (mostly male) colleagues who voted to reject her application.

Like her, many women interviewed believed that they were marginalized due to embodied differences from colleagues and the content of their research—especially related to issues of race, gender, and class. One assistant professor in another field explained:

Ethnic minorities want to study racial discrimination . . . a lot of women are studying poverty, or child poverty, and that's not very valued in the discipline. I'm a bit reluctant to say that, you know, minorities including women drift to a particular, a more interesting, a certain kind of political research. But I think if you come from a background where you feel discriminated against in some way or if you just had a harder start, you're more likely to be concerned with these issues. And they're not valued academically (Assistant Professor, Canada, 2007).

Respondents relayed how they experienced the devaluation of their labour and scholarship in ways both dramatic (rejection of tenure and promotion applications) and subtle. The same assistant

professor observed how research on inequality was not valued at annual disciplinary conferences:

You know, the annual meeting of the discipline, it's white old guys in suits . . . It can be quite nasty, the way that work gets discussed. It's highly competitive . . . Criticism isn't really constructive, but rather destructive because of the way it's communicated . . . There's really little value attached to collaborative work, which again I think is something women probably are more likely to do (Assistant Professor, Canada, 2007).

Several masculinist behaviours emerge in this short narrative: destructive modes of feedback and communication, competition, the devaluation of collaboration, and the racialization of these behaviours.

Other more subtle gendered behaviours happen in less performative, daily, routine work activities, such as letters of recommendation. Seager (2000) captures this through discourse analysis of letters written for candidates on the job market. She identifies gendered language depicting men and women. She found that men were often described in terms of their robust physicality, with their families presented as an advantage to their career in providing stability; some (heterosexual) men were partnered with a "charming wife." Conversely, women applicants are discussed in terms of mental and emotional states, *their* families discussed as hindrance.

As another example, in one graduate program where I worked, women graduate students often baked and brought baked goods to meetings with graduate committees. This was a gendered contribution; I never attended a meeting with goods baked by male students, but women students routinely baked. Dissertations, comprehensive exams, and annual reviews were discussed over elaborate offerings: breads, cakes, and cookies. I wondered how women found time to bake while preparing. Some may have found solace and relief from stress in baking; some may have found the mere availability of freshly baked goods in meetings comforting. In this context, although I too like to bake, these gendered performances felt out of place and made me feel uncomfortable and feminized by association in masculinist environments. I never discussed this with students, however, as I did not find it my place to police modes of participation. People find

myriad ways to cope with stress, and—as part of this project, in an effort to respond in healthier ways to stress—I tried to witness as many coping mechanisms as possible.

Stress

Participants spoke frequently of stress. When asked how they recognized more acute stress, they spoke explicitly of health and their bodies; it was clear that working conditions contributed to or aggravated ill health, and there was no doubt that high stress levels manifested physically. This affirms Schuurman's (2009) findings in a survey of over 700 academic geographers, over 50% of whom reported health conditions related to stress. Some women I interviewed spoke of losing and gaining weight during the PhD, first year on faculty, and tenure process. Many mentioned missing meals. Many struggled with insomnia: trouble falling or staying asleep, or waking up worried about work.

Many named their first years teaching as a time of heightened stress. Consider the following account of the transition from graduate to faculty status:

Oh god, it was unbelievable . . . I was designing a new course, with material that I didn't know. I was totally stressed out in the classroom. I was traveling too much . . . I wasn't eating. I couldn't sleep. I would come home, and it would be 9:30 the night before I had to teach two classes the next day, and I didn't know what to do (Assistant Professor, U.S., 2006).

This woman observed that most of her colleagues did not notice these problems, or that they were expected and normalized, a kind of "hazing" that left her nowhere to go: "It felt very kind of, I'm—I'm in all this all by myself. But of course I'm being evaluated because I'm untenured, so I'm alone. But it really counts, which is not a good pairing." This aloneness exacerbates alienation and isolation. She mentioned that only two colleagues noticed her struggling. I asked what that meant to her:

It made me think that maybe this is normal because the story people told me over and over, which I have to say is one of the worst things to tell a new faculty member, is, "I remember that. I remember being up at 2:00 am writing those lectures that first year. You'll get through it."

As this narrative demonstrates, stress was a common and shared experience, but not one that

people confronted or changed. It was experienced commonly, yet in isolation; it caused suffering, yet appeared to be collectively expected and accepted.

Fertility

The ideal worker does not have children or fertility concerns, and for several women, the stress of the job manifested in struggles with fertility. And, fertility issues exacerbated the stress of the job. This is not surprising, given experiences detailed in graduate school and immediately after the PhD and their correspondence with women's reproductive years.

For some, these struggles began with decisions about whether, how, and when to have children. Research has documented women academics' struggles with fertility and parenting (Walton-Roberts 2010; Mason et al. 2013). Many delayed having children, or did not make the decision but simply found that work and lifestyle did not allow for children as they worked toward PhD completion, reviews, tenure, and promotion. Others shared evidence that the stress of work directly affected fertility. One participant was tracking ovulation and explained that her cycle directly paralleled teaching responsibilities. During the semester, ovulation stopped completely, only to begin again during summer term when she did not teach (Assistant Professor, U.S., 2007). Another woman reported not having her period during most of her first year on faculty (Assistant Professor, U.S., 2009).

Ambivalence about having children was common. So too was miscarriage. Full professors interviewed shared stories of trying for first or second children, but experiencing miscarriage and other forms of infertility.

One full professor characterized fertility struggles as unrelated to work. Reflecting on her plan to become a mother, she first framed these as unrelated to her career, but then went on to narrate these struggles in relation to career stages: "I had these one-year jobs all the time, so I was always on the job market the first few years . . . I mean I always thought I would do that after I was 35 or so. And—I spent so long trying to get jobs" (Professor, U.S., 2009). She tried to get pregnant for a while and then delayed trying again until she was in her late thirties. She then describes the struggle with fitting in time-consuming and time-specific fertility treatments

and their intersection with a successful time in her career:

My work schedule, and traveling around, and giving talks and stuff. And I didn't say, "Okay, if I really want to do this, I have to stay home and get pregnant." I wasn't either willing to do that, or thinking that I had to make that compromise. And so I just did what I did, and I fit the treatments in. But each treatment I took several months to decide that I would go further . . . I did that so I didn't stress myself, but I think it was a mistake. You know, like when you have to go back and blame yourself . . . It would have worked if I wasn't so slow about it, if I didn't take a sabbatical . . . and decide I would do one more thing (Professor, U.S., 2007).

Although common, issues related to fertility are invisibilized and self-blame mobilized, as in this narrative. Fertility issues such as miscarriage carry with them a silence, becoming invisible stressors experienced in isolation: shared privately, if at all. In addition to the grief of losing a child or not being able to get pregnant, women often bore the burden of not being able to share these experiences with colleagues or explain why or how they were struggling.

Female doctoral students have discussed decisions about fertility and asked my advice. Women faculty colleagues have also shared having had these conversations with students. I find them challenging, if important. I respond that every person makes her own decisions, that there is never a "right," "perfect," or even "rational" time to have a child. Fertility, pregnancy, childbirth, and parenting add stress at any time. I have witnessed friends and colleagues have children as students, and as contract and tenured faculty. It is never easy. My advice is to never take for granted that any part will be easy, including getting pregnant, and to leave time and note that these decisions cannot always be planned—though for some who struggle with infertility or queer people, the requirement of fertility treatments involves significant planning. We often do not know what challenges await until immersed. We cannot anticipate miscarriages or their effects, including months or years of grieving.

Some graduate students, upon witnessing the fertility struggles of faculty, understand their own potential as academics in relation to their plans for family later in life. Some opt out; others opt in:

Having family becomes this big decision that you may or may not be able to make. But it doesn't come at a convenient time in the tenure process, and that's a huge topic. We're seeing so many of our friends, particularly women, at the age where, you know, having children is something that is now or never. And I hadn't realized the extent to which fitting children into an academic career could be anywhere near as difficult as it seems to be (Doctoral student, Canada, 2006).

One participant who knew that she was unable to bear children at a young age offered a telling observation: "As someone who—I've known that I can't have kids. I've known that for a long time, which sort of makes me, you know, I should be a good fit . . . It seems very clear to me that being a childless woman in academia is a much better fit" (Doctoral student, Canada, 2006).

Burnout

Burnout arose repeatedly in interviews and is not a unique finding of this study (Shanafelt et al. 2009). When it surfaced in interviews, I asked what burnout felt like. Personally, I experienced it when I became ill, again when I applied for and received tenure, and again when I threw myself into work after having a miscarriage. For me this involved a constant aching and tiredness, coupled with insomnia—waking up alert in the middle of the night or extremely early, unable to sleep again; a yearning for sleep coupled with its elusive nature, a familiar frustration for people with insomnia. Relief was hard to find. My own consumption of caffeine, alcohol, and sleeping aids intensified as stress increased. By the time I had tenure, I also had a chiropractor, massage therapist, and psychotherapist—a battery of healers. After tenure, I set about the work of getting healthier. Getting tenure helped. So did getting away for one year with a visiting position elsewhere. The new environment offered renewal. I changed my ways of working, placed stricter boundaries around work, and implemented healthy measures more proactively to prevent things becoming unmanageable.

The need to continue "at all costs" to the self recurred. Pushing limits leads to burnout, eventually, and many relayed a desire to slow down. One assistant professor described her weekly work routine: "So it's in a way survival right now. I've just retreated. It's all I can do . . . go and teach classes

and then leave. By the end of the week, I'm just thoroughly emotionally and physically exhausted. The weekend becomes the recovery" (Assistant Professor, U.S., 2007). A recent study with over 500 faculty members at Boise State found that they worked 61 hours per week on average, including—on average—an extra 10 hours on weekends (Flaherty 2014), leaving little time for recovery.

Invisibility and devaluation

Consider the following statements from a woman who had recently learned that a committee had voted to deny her tenure application. After explaining the burnout and exhaustion brought on by this, she spoke of feeling invisible:

I'm so trying to avoid being in that building, seeing those people—as much as possible . . . Eventually I need to go back to faculty meetings. I've basically just become invisible, and that in itself is pissing me off—that I'm allowing that process to do that. And so because of that reason, I know I need to be more visible and to be that reminder that you can't just so easily dismiss people, so I'm getting there. I obviously must make many people feel uncomfortable. And I don't think of myself as this renegade or rebel, like a martyr, at all. But I guess my work, which they completely dismiss . . . [The negative vote] just tries to completely make invisible, erase all of my intellectual activities in the last five and a half years, and so obviously there are people there that feel that my issues aren't relevant, aren't important to [my field], which for me makes it even more important that I should be doing these things. Students don't feel that way. Students sign up for my classes (Assistant Professor, U.S., 2007).

As she struggles with rejection, she also pressures herself to return, to embody resilience and resistance.

Women spoke painfully of their own embodied devaluation: "I don't feel any active hatred, but I don't think that I'm the kind of person that carries any currency here" (Assistant Professor, U.S., 2006). I then asked this woman who she thought was valued. She responded:

It's very gendered. I think it's men who kind of go along, don't ruffle a lot of feathers, just do what they're expected to do, you know, play the game, shake the right hands, don't raise any thorny

questions. I think that's what they're looking for . . . I don't think I'm at all what they're looking for. I don't think they've figured out—they, meaning the powers that be—I don't think they've figured out a way to get rid of us.

In the face of hostile work environments that range from benign neglect to outright dismissal, some women literally disappear by losing weight. Some disappear due to illness. Others work harder to be noticed. As participants have stated, they notice when no one notices.

Departure

I interviewed people debating whether to leave academia; some among them ultimately decided to leave or were pushed out, while others decided to stay. One finishing graduate student, who had had a previous illness, decided after observing unhealthy practices that an academic career would put her at too much risk of returning to ill health:

I see so many people getting sick, getting stressed. Watching the kind of physical pressures on people working too hard—and that's not specific to academia but any kind of work life where there's not balance. I feel like I've been seriously ill; I've been there. I'm not prepared to have this again. And that's what's making me very disinclined to go down an academic alley, when I had no idea that people really did work 50-60 hour weeks for extended periods of time. It's simply not worth it . . . I see the impacts in this very material way on people's well-being. And yet there is a culture in which you push through . . . This process is so much about the mind; the mind can weigh so heavily on the body . . . We know intellectually somehow that we're hurting ourselves, and that's not healthy. Yet still, we continue doing it (Doctoral student, Canada, 2006).

For more precarious workers such as finishing graduate students and women on short-term contracts, these were especially difficult and emotional conversations. Research shows dramatic shifts from more secure, tenured positions to higher percentages of courses now being taught by instructors on short-term contracts; women and people of colour do a disproportionate amount of this labour, exacerbating the gendered, classed, and racialized dimensions of stress with precarity (Curtis 2014). This cycle of precarity intensifies

many of the experiences articulated in this article: limited resources for health insurance or fertility treatments, poor or little office space that pushes all work off campus, and uncertainty about future employment all add to the stress of daily work life.

While some made difficult, yet calculated decisions not to “press on” “at all costs,” others found themselves pushed out of academia. These were among the more painful and emotive exchanges in interviews, often tearful and with shaky voices articulating feelings of fear, despair, and loss over the decision to ultimately give up the work that one loves when it does not provide a livelihood.

Discussion

These findings show gendered processes of subject formation and alienation and the challenges women face in performing ideal worker status throughout their careers. They respond with various strategies, some intentional and others mere consequences of stress: fighting for change, but contending with illness, invisibility, disappearance, departure.

These findings are neither new nor shocking, but documented by women and feminists before (e.g., Cox et al. 2012). A well-publicized study by MIT (1999) found that not only overt forms of discrimination hold women back, but smaller day-to-day things: smaller office and lab space, lower salaries, not being invited or comfortable at social events, not being heard, being talked over in meetings. My findings affirm the MIT study: small things accumulated to exclude and subject women to inequitable treatment over time.

More recently, in *The Feminist Wire* (Cox et al. 2012) and an edited collection titled *Presumed Incompetent* (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al. 2012), women of colour and working-class identities write about embodied experiences of the intersection of class and race in the academy. On the one hand, these lived experiences involve greater service requirements and greater care roles as colleagues identify women of colour to “represent” diversity. Committee loads are disproportionately high compared to those of white, male colleagues. Additionally, students bring more issues to women of colour, identifying them as allies and nurturers more likely to understand experiences of discrimination and oppression. Simultaneously, women contend with more severe and devastating forms of gendered,

racialized, sexualized, and ableist harassment; bullying; exclusion; and microaggression (Valentine 1998; Chouinard 2010; Sue 2010).

While it remains impossible to know the precise relationship between work conditions, stress, and the intersection between exterior work environs and interior well-being, there is no doubt that an important correlation exists. Rather than a balance, there is a continuum between and a need to integrate work and life in ways that sustain mental, emotional, and physical health and well-being. Women experience the intersections of life and work in gendered ways, from fertility to hostile treatment, from classrooms to conferences. Subsequent research should explore what kinds of institutions, policies, and environments support healthier working and living.

As the material shows, some women opt out to survive; others are pushed out by colleagues or illness. Many suffer in isolation because there are few environments where these issues can be discussed for fear of exclusion, reprisal, further alienation, and the devaluation of women deemed “sick,” or unable to handle pressure or perform to imagined expectations of ideal workers.

What to do?

Here, I list five strategies raised by participants or existing literature. Without space to explore these in detail, it is important to note that better ways of working exist; collective struggles to change work cultures are happening; and individuals and institutions can take steps to improve experiences shared in this article.

1. *Mentor and be mentored.* These findings made clear that women suffer in isolation. Yet no one can survive or enact change alone. We need to find help and help others, and mentoring has long been a feminist strategy, as Moss and co-authors (1999) note.
2. *Establish boundaries around work times and places.* This seems simple, yet remains challenging, given technological developments, increased expectations, and the creep of work into the rest of life.
3. *Promote caring and healthy ways of working and value care work* (e.g., Lawson 2009; Schuurman 2009). This work is both individual and collective. It involves active discussion of care work as

- an essential and important part of life and work (Mountz et al. 2015).
4. *Decolonize time by embracing slowness, laziness* (Shahjahan 2014), and *failure* (Halberstam 2011). Scholars engaged in the slow scholarship movement (Hartman and Darab 2012) are challenging the unsustainable pace of work by changing engagements with time. In recent articles, geographers promote measures for slowing work life down, ranging from strategies for dealing with email to the promotion of care for community, colleagues, students, and selves (Schuurman 2009; Peake and Mullings, forthcoming).
 5. *Form collectives*. Forming and working in collectives proves key to survival and thriving in difficult environments. Collectives can forge alternative, inclusive spaces and ways of working that challenge individualization, competition, and hierarchy. Collectives also take the form of unionization, providing greater transparency and accountability for equitable policies and practices (more prevalent in Canadian than American institutions).

As Aerin Jacob observed, “We’ve known basically what to do about it for decades: diversify hiring practices, increase mentorship, identify and reduce explicit and implicit biases, address harassment, have daycares on campus for students and faculty” (Schwartz 2015). Institutions know these recommendations. The MIT (1999) study makes additional suggestions. There exists no shortage of evidence or advice, but weak political will and few incentives for change serve to maintain the status quo.

Conclusions

Given extensive documentation of women’s suffering and inequitable treatment, why is this still happening and *how can it be changed?* It can be changed: through formal and informal practices and policies of inclusion, equity, and care. Institutional policies must support different kinds of workers. Unfortunately, we move away from this reality.

I wrote this article because I know too many people whose relationships, health, and self-confidence crumbled under the pressure, stress, and unsustainable conditions of the academy. I wrote because I know many women who postponed having

children until they finished the PhD, secured a job, received tenure, survived—only to find it was too late. I wrote because I have struggled and seen many struggle around me. We are all driven by passion to do work that we love. These jobs begin with this passion; but we must also apply passion to care for self and others.

Still, these conversations are not easy, rendering oneself vulnerable in the midst of the pain and performance required of successful academics. In the process of sending this paper through a journal’s review process, I ran into the ironies, opportunities, and limitations of attempting to be a social scientist studying issues central to her own life. I find myself as subject and object of study, writer of my own experience and others’. Some people encouraged less complaining and more analysis of the quotes, a bigger *n* drawn from survey data, less of my story, more Social Science. Perhaps they are right. Then again, these are facts, these bits of self that pepper this paper: a miscarriage, an illness, some trouble along the way. These things happened. Must being an academic, delegitimized in any other role—as in the searches for wholeness, meaning, and healing, as in the imperfections and problems along the way to knowledge creation and dissemination? Where does one cross the line between accountability in representing one’s self and interests in research and exercising too much authorial power of some kind? As I type these words, I anticipate their erasure. Should these conversations be relegated back to offices with closed doors and late night talks?

Although social scientists have been the focus of this article, they are not the only academics suffering. There exist ample empirical data regarding scientists and their difficult work conditions and cultures (e.g., Schwartz 2015). Additionally, these interviews were conducted in North America *before* and *as* audit culture was taking hold at the universities where participants worked and before most people received email on smartphones. In my own experience, work conditions have intensified with greater pressures in the time since.

Masculinist spaces, practices, and topics articulated by participants assign value to some bodies and work over others. Discrimination and patriarchy can divide, fracturing people and alliances between them, privileging some forms of knowledge and praxis while devaluing alternative modes of

being and working. Women disappear as they find themselves, their labour, and ways of working devalued.

This article shows healthy workspaces disappearing as women manage workloads that exact unsustainable tolls on their bodies. We experience this in every corner of work, confronting our own denigration in conferences, classrooms, offices, faculty meetings, and at home where we have trouble leaving these realities behind. We need to work collectively to make space for healthy work and workers: not only for women, but for everyone.

This is not the work of women alone, although they may lead. This is everyone's work. We must find ways to discuss and research topics such as intersectionality and our embodied work conditions, and change the ways that we work, rather than accept or reward. We must take care not to destroy or be destroyed in the process.

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