



JOURNAL OF PRAGMATIC CONSTRUCTIVISM

Publish *and* perish: How critical scholars are increasing trapped into toxic double binds

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1 Introduction

The expression “publish or perish” designates the pressure to publish academic texts in order to succeed in the academic career. It has been coined in the first half of the twentieth century (see Garfield, 1996 for a discussion) but has regained new life in the late 1990s/early 2000s with the institutionalization of scholars’ management systems aiming at increasing publication. Those are direct consequences of the Bologna convention (1999) and the subsequent ‘Lisbon strategy’ (2000) the objective of which were to improve the competitiveness of European higher education institutions (see Benninghoff, 2011, for details).

Since then, much has been written on the topic, more specifically about the unexpected effects of the management systems that embody the ‘publish or perish’ mantra – see for instance Gendron (2008), Molinié and Bodenhausen (2010, 2013), Moosa (2018), Perret and Taskin (2019) or Supiot (2020). It has been argued that they lead to the impoverishment of research itself: its capacity to open innovative paths; the expected decline of some methods (qualitative, ethnographic for instance); opportunistic behavior, frauds and other unethical practices; etc. At the end, it is “the role of universities as the foundation for the whole project of enlightenment and knowledge-based society” which is threatened by IT-based performances measures (Nørreklit et al., 2019). Less frequent research has highlighted the cost of pressure on scholars, especially the young ones (Miller et al., 2011), sometimes described in terms of alienation (Le Breton-Miller and Miller, 2021).

In this article¹ we suggest that, (i) despite these criticisms, pressure has continuously increased for the three last decades, and not only for young faculty members, and (ii) this pressure is exacerbated for critical scholars (CSs hereafter). Namely it is part of a double bind – a pattern of relationships which is particularly detrimental to quality of life and mental health. Thus, if you are a CS, publishing does not prevent you from perishing.

This text does not strictly follow the rules of academic writing. It does not systematically review prior literature on the topic and the methodology is not very rigorous. Indeed although it is largely informed by our own experience, it does not comply with the usual requirements of auto-ethnography (Chang, 2008). As far as we know, our own experience is shared by a number of other CSs, but we did not scientifically collect empirical evidence of it.

What could be considered as bibliographical and methodological weaknesses with regard to traditional academic writing can be alternatively claimed as a conscious choice of deviating from the norm. Indeed, as we explain below, one of the issues in critical publication is that it relies on the same processes as the mainstream (non-critical) one. This special issue, devoted to celebrating a researcher who values non-mainstream approaches, appears as a relevant place to make a step aside from the track.

¹ The first author would like to thank the participants of the 1st francophone conference on critical and interpretive research (Toulouse online, France, July 2021), Wafa Khelif for her comments on the first draft of this text, and the many colleagues whose experience has inspired these thoughts.

The remainder of this text is organized as follows. First, we present the concept of double bind, on which our argument is based. Second, drawing on a quick survey run last year for a critical conference, we show that, despite the fact that being a critical scholar means different things according to CSs, these meanings are always core in scholars' identity construction – thus making persons more likely to experience double binds in their activity. Third, after having recalled the evolution of the 'publish or perish' issue for the last decades, we illustrate the dynamics of double binds in academia and suggest that they are particularly toxic to critical scholars. A short conclusion mentions the limits of this analysis and suggests paths to reduce the toxicity of double binds.

2 The concept of double bind

The concept of double bind was born in psychiatry more than half a century ago in relation to schizophrenia (Bateson et al., 1956). Then it was developed by the Palo Alto School under the label of 'paradoxical injunction(s)'. Watzlawick et al. (1967) distinguish between contradiction and paradox. Contradiction induces a conflict from which one emerges by choosing one of the terms of the alternative. One may find it difficult to choose, make a mistake, regret, but the choice is logically possible. As says the proverb, you can't have your cake and eat it, but you can choose to eat your cake or not. The paradox is a "contradiction that follows correct deduction from consistent premises" (Watzlawick et al., 1967, p. 188). It can be logical ('I am lying') or "pragmatic". In the latter case, it may take the form of one or more injunctions. 'Be spontaneous' is probably the best-known paradoxical injunction. It places the person who receives this injunction in an untenable position, because if they obey, they are no longer spontaneous – so they simultaneously disobey. Unlike contradiction, the paradoxical injunction "bankrupts choice itself" (ibid., p. 217). Whatever you answer, you are wrong.

A double bind situation can be analyzed as a set of paradoxical injunctions and requires several "ingredients" (Watzlawick et al., 1967):

- Two or more persons, engaged in a relationship of great vital value, either physically or psychologically, for at least one of them, called the 'victim';
- A repeated experience, which leads the victim to expect this double bind and to integrate it as something 'natural';
- A first negative injunction, formulated as a prohibition or a conditional threat, and combined with a threat of punishment. The learning context is based on the avoidance of punishment, rather than the quest for reward;
- A second injunction, often more subtle than the first one (sometimes non-verbal or emanating from a third party), which contradicts the first, but which, as the first one, is reinforced by a potential punishment;
- A third negative injunction that forbids the removal of the contradiction. This element is not needed when the punishments associated with the first two injunctions imply a vital threat;
- Finally, all these ingredients are no longer necessary when the victim has learned to perceive their world in terms of double bind. Any one of these ingredients may then be sufficient to produce the detrimental effects of the whole.

According to Bateson (1978), three elements are enough to 'knot' a double bind: (1) the relationship is intense, making an appropriate response vitally important to one of the individuals, (2) the other persons in the relationship are sending messages that negate each other, and (3) the individual is unable to comment on these messages (Bateson, 1978). To summarize, and for the purposes of our further analysis, we propose to reorganize all above elements as follows. A double bind includes (1) a contradiction, (2) a threat of punishment(s), (3) a vital relationship, (4) an impossible comment. One or more paradoxical injunctions form(s) a double bind, terms that we use interchangeably in this text.

Although the concept has been coined in relation to schizophrenia and family communication, Bateson (1978) states that double binds do not only occur in families, but they also affect people in 'normal' relationships, regardless of the social context of these relationships. The applicability of the concept to organizations has been debated, especially the intensity of the relationship (see Venter et al., 2019). However we support the view that our relationship to work is vital, thus the relationship to our organization intense – see below for more details.

Double binds are highly detrimental to their 'victims'. They may result in paranoia, as well as paralysis of action, withdrawal and lack of independent thinking (Bateson et al., 1956). They generate stress and anxiety, fear, sometimes panic. They create frustration and confusion and by excluding the possibility of any adequate answer to demands, they prevent learning. They may disturb behavior and identity construction, induce inhibition or hostility, sometimes aggression (Visser and Van der Heijden, 2015; Venter et al., 2019). They threaten psychological safety and they foster negative self-perceptions likely to jeopardize persons' well-being and mental health.

Double bind and paradox, which is most often used in management science to describe organizational situations, are sister concepts. So why do we prefer to import a psychological concept, rather than using the established management one? A first reason is that a concept developed by experts in human matters seems more relevant to analyze in detail how the situation affects the persons' psyche. Comparatively, the management science concept (paradox) is both primarily

interested in groups (not individuals) and subtlety imbued with issues of performance and efficiency, which are central to this discipline.

A second reason is that in our view, the classical definitions of paradox do not draw a sufficiently clear line between paradox and contradiction, a concept that is close but has very different consequences, as we have seen above. For instance, Smith and Lewis (2011) define paradox as “contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time” (p. 386), synergistically within a larger system. This definition, like many others, appears too general to delineate the specificities of paradoxes that differentiate them from contradictions. If we use the metaphor of a journey, contradiction would be a tiring path, full of tensions, but you finally arrive somewhere, whereas paradox would ineluctably lead you to a dead end. This lack of precision in the concept of paradox explains why management research often report tensions that do not turn into dead ends, thus misusing the concept of paradox – see for example Cousineau and Damart (2017).

The value of the double bind concept is the emphasis it puts on the *context* of the contradiction (threat of punishment, impossible comment) and the *people* experiencing the (vital) relationship, elements that the concept of paradox does not investigate enough if any. A situation may be perceived in terms of double bind by a person, not another one, despite the similarity of their ‘objective’ conditions of employment and work, because each person has a subjective and singular relationship to work.

3 Being a critical scholar: what does it mean?

To our knowledge, quite interestingly, this question has not been addressed as such so far, maybe because critical scholarship is “elusive” (Gendron, 2018). For sure, the co-existence of two divergent conceptions of criticality does not help. On the one hand, drawing on Marxist, Bourdieusian or Foucauldian frameworks, radical critique denounces domination, which is assumed to be complete and to leave dominated parts of the society powerless. On the other hand, the Boltanski notion of critique assumes that domination is incomplete: beyond structures, in practical arrangements and uses, there are loopholes through which the dominated can act and sometimes bring changes (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999/2005).

Whatever the academic definition, being a critical scholar is a matter of personal definition. Last year one of us took the opportunity of a French conference dedicated to “critical and interpretive accounting research” in which she was invited as a keynote speaker, to personally ask participants, before the conference, about their own conception of critical scholarship (“Being a critical scholar, what does it mean to you?”). She received 18 answers (8 men, 10 women), that is, 15% of the expected audience, which is not too bad considering that the conference gathered interpretive scholars who would not necessarily recognize themselves as critical. Although the message said that “few lines [would] be enough”, the responses were most often very detailed, and exhibited a great variety of definitions of oneself as a critical scholar, with however some commonalities. The 18 responses mentioned 73 items: on average, each respondent mentioned four items to describe themselves.

Table 1: Summary of self-perceptions as a critical scholar.

GRAND TOTAL	73 items	18 persons	GROUP 1 (n=3, 17%)	GROUP 2 (n=6, 33%)	GROUP 3 (n=7, 39%)	GROUP 4 (n=2, 11%)
18 persons						
Category A THE SCHOLAR'S ACTIVITY	39 (54%)	18 (100%)	3	6	7	2
Category B THE POLITICAL DIMENSION	14 (18%)	8 (44%)		6		2
Category C THE SCHOLAR'S ATTITUDES	20 (28%)	9 (50%)			7	2

We have tentatively categorized these 18 responses and 73 items as shown in Table 1, which, as all categorizations, is not free from our subjectivity.

Being a critical scholar means three large categories of self-perceptions. Category A gathers responses in terms of activity: what, concretely, does the scholar do? It represents more than the half of all self-perceptions (54%) and *all* respondents mention items in this category. Table 2 provides the details of this category. Category B (see details in Table 3) is about the political dimension of critical scholarship and it only accounts for 18% of all self-perceptions. Only 8

respondents (44%) mention such political items. Category C (see details in Table 4) is related to scholars' attitudes and it represents 28% of all perceptions. Half of the respondents mention such self-perceptions.

We categorized respondents into four groups, according to the importance they give to each category of self-perceptions. Almost three persons out of four cite self-perceptions from two categories: 6 respondents (33%) mention activity and the political dimension (categories A and B), while 7 (39%) mention activity and attitudes (categories A and C). At both ends of what can be considered as a continuum in terms of multiple and complex self-perception, we find 3 (17%) persons who only cite self-perceptions in terms of activity (category A), and still less (2 persons, 11%) who recognize themselves in the three categories.

Table 2: Category A self-perceptions (activity)

THE SCHOLAR'S ACTIVITY: WHAT DO THEY DO?	39 (54% of self-perceptions)
THEY QUESTION: Question or deconstruct the evidence, norms, established assumptions, theories, epistemology and assumptions of control; draw on new theoretical frameworks and challenge classical ones	17
THEY REJECT: quantitative, scientist, positivist, instrumental approaches, the so-called good practices and the doxa	6
THEY FOCUS ON: the impact of accounting on society and the social consequences of their research, qualitative approaches, the complexity and fragility of arrangements; the production processes, unexpected/perverse effects, continuous analysis of the social world; new theories, new fields, new research objects; centrality of the experience, intelligence and subjectivity of actors	16

Table 2 provides the details of self-perceptions in terms of activity (54% of all self-perceptions). (Uppercase words are ours (tentative sub-categorizations) while lowercase ones summarize verbatims – this is also the case for Tables 3 and 4.) Most self-perceptions in Category A are expressed in terms of either a generic intellectual posture that can be summarized as 'questioning' or conversely, specific focuses (research questions, methods etc.).

Table 3: Category B self-perceptions (political dimension)

THE POLITICAL DIMENSION	14 (18% of self-perceptions)
In GENERAL: of objects, analyses and conduct of research	1
DOMINATION: power relations; inequities of all kinds - sex, race, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation; accounting as a means of social control	5
EMANCIPATORY goal: transform society, emancipate the public, make room for marginalized people	5
Proposing ALTERNATIVES	3

Less than half of the respondents (44%) mention the political dimension of their activity. Related items are both less frequent (only 18% of all self-perceptions) and more diverse, as shown in Table 3.

Finally half of the respondents (50%) mention items in terms of personal attitudes. Table 4 shows the great variety of such representations, which only account for 28% of all items. We do not know whether respondents believe these attitudes apply to themselves, but at least we can say that they delineate the ideal image of what should be a critical

scholar. The classification of some items in Category A or C may be debatable. Whereas Category A is concerned with academic work itself, in Category C we have privileged items related to more personal aspects (attitudes, roles etc.).

Table 4: Category C self-perceptions (personal attitudes)

THE SCHOLAR'S PERSONAL ATTITUDES	20 (28% of self-perceptions)
REFLEXIVITY reflexivity, avoidance of preconceptions, general intellectual attitude, step aside, permanent alert, awareness of the perverse effects of their knowledge	7
NON-DOMINANT POSTURE Humility, avoidance of overhanging posture, open the debate instead of closing it, do not consider themselves superior	4
Give A PLACE TO OTHERS Need for interlocutors, possible conflicts, co-construction, interdisciplinarity	4
WORK ON THEMSELVES Self-questioning > finding oneself and being aware of one's roots, attachments, commitments and interests	2
SOCIAL ROLES Claim their point of view (like a literary or film critic), go beyond prescription	2
CAREER Consider research beyond a careerist approach (i.e. high-ranked publications)	1

This inventory shows that there are as many definitions of a CS as respondents. Self-perceptions are unequally complex and politically aware, as illustrated by our four groups of respondents. While all respondents define critical scholarship in terms of academic work, some of them are also aware of its implications in terms of personal posture, behavior and relationship to others. Some others highlight the political dimension of critical research. Interestingly, with only two exceptions, those who perceive the political dimension do not perceive the personal one – and vice-versa.

These various definitions of critical scholarship are of equal value (no one is better than another) and, in a next step, it would be interesting to understand how, individually, they can be associated with specific socialization processes and, more generally, the unique subjectivity of the person. However, whatever the definition, both the content and form of responses suggest that all items are core to the responding scholars' identity. We find traces of counter-identification in the rejected items (see Category A). Both political and personal items (Categories B and C) are expressed in a way that clearly shows respondents' identity work, as in the following verbatim:

"For me [being a critical scholar] is a continuous, never-ending analysis of the social world around us as well as our private lives. It means seeking, questioning, even experiencing conflict with our dearest ones in order to reach a certain level of equality. It is calling ourselves, our education, our ways of life, into question, in order to find ourselves".

Obviously critical scholarship brings coherence in scholars' lives – ensuring the consistency between who they are, their values, their trajectory and what they do as scholars. In other words, critical scholarship is meaningful.

The concept of 'meaningfulness of work *and* at work' has been worked out by Estelle Morin (2008), as a way of bridging the traditional notions of motivation and implication. She has identified six potential sources of meaningfulness (social purpose, moral correctness, learning and development, autonomy, positive relationships, recognition) the importance of which vary according to persons. While all six factors may be potentially relevant for all scholars, social purpose is certainly key for critical scholars who value the political dimension of their activity, and moral correctness for those who pay attention to personal attitudes. Hence critical scholarship is a source of meaningfulness for most CSs.

4 How critical scholars are trapped in toxic double binds

We will now show how the contemporary conditions of scholarship trap scholars, and more specifically critical scholars, into toxic double binds. We will use the definition proposed above: a double bind includes (1) a contradiction, (2) a punishment threat, (3) a vital relationship, (4) an impossible comment. Beforehand we would like to briefly overview the present conditions of scholarship. This general picture does not do justice to the local institutional (public/private etc.) and geographical differences, nor to differences between institutions from the same institutional and geographical category. However, beyond details and examples, we believe that this picture accounts reasonably well for the working conditions of most scholars.

4.1 *The contemporary management of research*

As managers in the private and, increasingly, public sectors, scholars are managed according to neo-liberalist rules. Their activity is framed by management systems that include categorizations and quantification. Publications are counted and ranked, with the use of international, national or, less frequently, homemade (institution) rankings, the construction of which leaves room for harsh conflicts and negotiations (for an example, see Andrew et al., 2020). There are discrepancies between rankings so that, when it is open, the organizational choice of using a specific ranking to managing ones' scholars may also be fiercely negotiated. For instance, sub-disciplines (marketing, accounting etc.) may have divergent interests according to how their disciplinary journals are respectively ranked in the various rankings. A journal rank means prestige, and assumingly, quality. Management systems also include rewards and other incentives that are deemed to govern behavior. Most of all, you are not promoted if you do not publish – which is encapsulated in the ‘publish or perish’ expression.

Since the 1990s when such systems were developed, they have gained in sophistication to increase the pressure on scholars towards publication *in high-level journals*. Indeed publication, and more specifically high-ranking publication, is key for the ranking of programs and educative institutions. Again there are a plethora of international (*Financial Times*, Shanghai etc.) and national rankings, which are deemed to help future clients to choose their education program. For an institution, being highly ranked is a promise of good students and subsequent revenues. Thus journal rankings and incentives are regularly reviewed to govern scholars' behavior toward high-ranking publication.

In one of our institutions for instance, thirty years ago, publications only generated research funds. Conference proceedings, chapters and books were less valued than articles but recognized. Today the amplitude of funding amounts is much greater than before: a generous fund is granted for an article published in one of the best-ranking journals, and the amounts decrease rapidly for lower-ranking journal articles. Chapters and books, unless highly “theoretical”, are poorly rewarded. Conference proceedings have not been rewarded for long. Besides, incentives now include various types of bonuses for the highest ranked journals, and their amounts follow the same curve as funds (rapid degressiveness). For both rewards (funds and bonuses), amounts are supposed to make high-ranking publication especially attractive and thus drive behavior.

Regarding promotion, the minimum number of publications (and their ranking) needed for tenure, which once was only “indicative”, has been made very explicit and continuously revised upwards during the last decades. Recently a minimum threshold was also set for the Full Professor grade, which led colleagues to argue that, in practice, it meant “a second tenure”. Once, without tenure but with good evaluations as a teacher, one could benefit from a less prestigious status that however enabled you to keep your job. This possibility vanished many years ago and the related status has recently disappeared.

The most recent change in the incentive system consists in the annual calculation of a score for each professor, to be compared to an expected minimum. If the score is above the expected threshold, the annual teaching load is reduced – and increased if one fails to reach the point. To compute the score, the publications of the last six years are considered and duly weighted according to a scale. All in all, pressure towards high-level publication is much higher today than some decades ago. Other organizations have developed systems the details of which may be different, but which always intensify pressure towards high-ranking publication.

Not only management systems have changed but also the conditions of publication. First, scholars have to think seriously about their strategy of publication: publishing a ‘good’ article in a journal whose ranking is not very high has a significant cost in terms of evaluation.

Besides, because of this increasing need to publish in high-ranking journals, the latter are overwhelmed by submissions. This has changed the ratio offer-demand in favor of journals. It is not exceptional that manuscripts are rejected at the fourth round, that is, after three revisions. Because the number of slots for publication has not increased in proportion to submitted papers, it is more difficult today to publish in top journals, compared to some decades ago. This means that it is over-important to comply with established norms, such as, for instance, mentioning the “research conversation” to which the article contributes. Such systematic demand, which is likely to eliminate creative research

(because it does follow one of the already known “conversations”), was not frequent some decades ago. It also means that competition between scholars has drastically increased.

Regarding critical scholarship, the situation is not very different. Explicitly “critical” journals (such as for instance, *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*) are still rare and the highest ranked journals do not publish critical research². Subsequently the dynamics described above (scarcity of places for publication, competition between scholars) fully applies to critical scholarship. Additionally, critical communities may have developed, but the processes of legitimization and domination that take place in them are the same as in mainstream communities. For instance, in the field of critical accounting, there are fully legitimate theoretical frameworks (e.g. Foucauldian governmentality, postmodernism, actor-network theory). However, these frameworks have been overused in the last decades so that they have lost their innovative and critical potential. They can be seen as mainstream in the critical community. ‘Indigenous’ theoretical frameworks that have not been translated into English are viewed with skepticism by reviewers, no matter how hard the authors try to present them. In terms of standards and conditions of publication, there is no difference from mainstream journals – same emphasis on “research conversation” and same late rejection of manuscripts. To sum up, one can wonder to what extent critical scholarship and publication are still critical.

We now examine the four elements of the double bind experienced by critical scholars.

4.2 Contradictions

Some of them are not specific to critical scholarship. Indeed, scholars have at least two activities: they research and they teach. Most of them do also some pedagogical (building education programs) and administrative (running programs, degrees etc.) work. All these activities are subject to organizational expectations, often translated into quantitative objectives. Teaching hours are measured, as well as the satisfaction of audiences, and we have seen above how research is quantified. Time is limited, hence a first contradiction stems from the competition of activities and their related simultaneous objectives. Although all objectives are said to be important, in practice in most institutions, research is given the greatest importance. In one of our institutions, some years ago, the Director of Research encouraged scholars to “stop feeding the monster” – the “monster” designating all activities that did not lead to high-ranking publication. Simultaneously, there were a number of institutional pressures to manage programs, participate in committees, join projects etc. We cannot do all we are asked to, but we are free to choose one of the terms of the contradiction (researching, teaching, other activities).

Additionally, research is an activity that is full of contradictions – that is, repeated choices that exclude one another. Again, you cannot do everything. If your paper has the requested potential, you can choose to target a top journal, which will take you several years of hard work, without any guarantee of success. Alternatively, you can target a lower ranked journal – less time, less work, greater probability of success. After some years, you will have a smarter publication record, but probably less rewards, given the present structure of incentive systems. You can choose to meet the expectations of your institution (and be rewarded accordingly) or give preference to your personal concerns and interests, when both are not convergent. For instance, quantitative research comes quicker to publication than qualitative one, but quantitative methods may not be your cup of tea. Maybe you value ethnographic studies, but they are very time consuming. Interdisciplinary research is stimulating but hard to publish because you have to convince reviewers who generally find it uncomfortable to get driven to a place where they are not experts. Last but not least, it is almost impossible to publish interdisciplinary research in high-ranking journals, which, with some very rare exceptions, publish strictly disciplinary articles.

Because CSs value the meaningfulness of their activity, they may privilege their own needs at the detriment of organizational ones. If so, because, as we have seen above, they question the mainstream theories, methods and research questions, it is likely that their research will be very difficult, if not impossible, to publish in top journals that favor mainstream approaches. There is thus a gap between what CSs are told to do and what they may choose to do.

4.3 Threats of punishment

We have already mentioned the penalties encountered by scholars who would not meet the injunction to publish in high-ranking journals – no career, no or low bonuses, no or poor recognition, more teaching hours. Those who fail to publish (enough) are labelled as “non-publishing” scholars in some research evaluation systems – a downgrading adjective. Similarly some evaluation reports may baldly conclude that the scholar “does not do research anymore” – wrongly equating the process and its outcome. There is not only a loss of social esteem and prestige, but also threats to self-image, -esteem and identity. Thus the organizational injunction to publication is very likely to induce threats of various extrinsic and intrinsic punishments.

² *Accounting, Organization and Society* is an exception in the accounting field.

If you decide to meet organizational injunctions, because you need the attached rewards (either financially or psychologically), then you will “stop feeding the monster”. You will invest the minimum level of time and energy in teaching (too bad if you like it); you will stop taking time for nice spontaneous informal exchange moments with colleagues (especially those from other departments) which have always stimulated your creativity; you will stop helping new colleagues to integrate in your team and institution; you will reduce your participation to conferences, because the scientific return on investment is random; etc. If positive relationships at work and social utility rank high in your personal scale of meaningfulness at/of work, such renunciations will decrease the meaning of your work. Then whereas you avoid the threat of extrinsic and intrinsic punishments associated with ‘insufficient’ publication, you expose yourself to other threats of punishment. In addition, those are likely to be perceived as self-punishment, because *you* make the decision to stop these psychologically rewarding activities – in other words, this is double punishment.

If you are a critical scholar, meeting your organization’s injunctions is hardly possible. It would mean giving up the research questions and methods that are part of your identity and the basis of your self-esteem. What you will probably do as a critical scholar is trying to elaborate what you think is a compromise between your institution’s and your own needs: publishing in the best possible journals, given the present structure of academic publication. Such a strategy is unfortunately bound to be illusory. There is no other way today to be recognized by your institution than publishing in top journals.

Such compromises may be understood as attempts to reconcile two kinds of ‘care of the self’ (Foucault, 1990). Formerly, the “care of the self” was “intellectually” orientated towards the internalization of the practical abilities of scientific research (writing, thinking, innovating, etc.) (Benninghoff, 2011). Contemporary research management systems have led to the emergence of a “managerialist care of the self” aiming at internalizing devices to keep control on one’s academic career (communication, time management, self-presentation) (ibid.).

4.4 Vital relationship and impossible comment

All experts agree on the point that work is vital. Depending on people and experience, it might be a matter of revenue, of occupational and more broadly social status, of social belongings and relationships, of social recognition, of personal development and meaningfulness of life, of self-esteem etc. In any case there are vital stakes attached to work, hence our relationship to work is intense – for a review of related research in clinical work psychology, see Ancelin-Bourguignon (2017).

Finally, it appears impossible to comment on the contradictions of present scholarship. In one of our institutions, scholars’ activity is evaluated by an adhoc committee on a multi-year basis, drawing on internal statistics (mostly about research and teaching) and reports, and on an activity report written by the applicant. When, in their activity reports, the latter mention the contradictions of research objectives with their other activities (significant pedagogical developments, administrative and program management tasks, specific institutional demands in terms of projects etc.), those are very seldom retrieved in the committee’s evaluation reports. Contradiction is merely disregarded and when performance is not as good as expected, there is *never* any mention that it might be because of the competition of activities within a limited frame of time.

Similarly, in this institution, scholars are consulted before important changes are brought to the evaluation system (rankings, rewards, impact on teaching). Despite a sometimes very significant negative advice (only slightly more than 50% of the faculty approved the last changes), changes are implemented on the basis that “a majority of scholars has approved the reform” and that “some return on experience will be done after implementation”. However no changes have ever been reversed after implementation. With time the system progressively increases pressure on high-ranking publication.

To sum up, contemporary academic management systems disregard the contradictions that are core to scholars’ activity. Those are sharper for critical scholars whose sources of meaningfulness of and at work are largely incompatible with continuously increasing institutional demands of high-ranking publication. Simultaneously incentive systems have gained in sophistication to force scholars to adopt the requested behavior. There has been less and less room for developing a critical research path that does not lead to serious extrinsic penalties (no promotion, no money, lack of recognition of efforts, feelings of being invisible etc.) and intrinsic injuries (negative impact on self-image and esteem, loss of selfconfidence etc.). All these ‘punishments’ foster negative emotions (sadness, anger, fear) that damage daily life and can have severe consequences on physical or mental health. All conditions are present for burn out, which is generally the consequence of an overinvestment in work *and* a lack of recognition. Well, at the end, you publish but nevertheless perish.

Venter et al. (2019) have coined the notion of “non-profit double bind” to explain how, in non-profit organizations, where the employment relationship is intense, the contradiction of institutional quantitative demands and personal qualitative objectives leads to dire consequences. Their empirical field (care organizations) has much in common with academia.

5 Conclusion: what can be done?

Today a minority of mainstream scholars play the hard game of top-level publication and win hard accordingly. The great majority, among which critical scholars, suffer silently, trying to compromise between institutional and personal requirements. Here we should distinguish between young and more established faculty. The former is likely to play the institutional game to get tenure whatever the price to pay: spending several years on one high-ranking article might be frustrating, as you cannot devote part of your time to new challenges that would probably be more exciting than rewriting your text repeatedly. Publishing bibliometric research in high-ranking journals may be a way to play the game, without being fooled by the meaningfulness of such research. But this kind of compromising strategy cannot be replicated very long. On the other hand, tenured faculty have more leeway to seek trade-offs but, as explained above, they are very costly. The lucky ones are the most senior scholars whose identity and self-esteem are strong enough to withstand the negative consequences of evaluation - and whose career stakes are behind them.

Regarding the Exit-Voice-Loyalty-Neglect model (Farrell, 1983), voice is impossible and exit not always an option for personal reasons. Loyalty is probably the only strategy possible for young scholars if they want to pursue an academic career. But if the price is high, such a strategy cannot last very long. The Neglect path, under various forms of withdrawal, appears as the only possible one in the medium term. Withdrawing may take the form of reducing ones' involvement in all other activities than research (for instance, ceasing the development of new courses, reducing your involvement in internal committees or projects, refusing to take charge of administrative functions, reducing interaction with other disciplines). You will not be well considered by the institution's administration (and maybe your peers) but it is a way to survive.

The safest way to withdraw and survive is to withdraw psychically, that is, stopping expecting institutional recognition. It is a long and difficult task because the recognition provided by any evaluation is psychically highly important. Conducting a Lacanian analysis, Vidaillet (2013) clearly shows how evaluation "is experienced as a verification of the self" (p. 83) that reassures the subject, who needs the gaze of the other to answer the inexhaustible "who am I question. One cannot better express the vital character of work. But evaluation is a "lure" (ibid, p. 208), it is infinitely disappointing, even painful, because it never delivers what it promises. Vidaillet (2013) suggests that employees should rid themselves of their own dependence on evaluation. This is a very promising way of reducing the vital nature of our relation to work, which however presupposes permanent reflexive work, given the archaic nature of our expectations regarding the other's gaze. "Devitalizing" the relationship to work is a way to unknot the double bind, thus to mitigate its toxicity.

If you are a member of an editorial board, especially in a critical or open to criticism journal, you can also do your best to stop the unethical practice that consists in asking for more than two revisions without guaranteeing publication. Such practice is awfully detrimental to authors who have spent months, sometimes years, to produce a text that is finally declared unpublishable. It is not true that a rejected paper can be submitted to another journal without extra work, especially when the original manuscript has been re-worked more than once according to the expectations of the journal, which are always narrowly specific. Then rejecting a manuscript in such conditions (i.e. after three revisions or more) is a severe damage to the researcher's' career and an even worse wound for the researcher's psyche. It annihilates both work and their authors.

The neo-liberalist management of scholars has many other aspects that we have not mentioned here but that would deserve investigation in relation to the elements developed above. For instance, what is the impact of national research assessment exercises and agencies on systems implemented in institutions? How does another evolution, at least in some countries like France, namely the need for scholars to seek funding for their projects, affect their activity? How does it instill a sense of precariousness and how does it affect scholars' perception of rewards/punishments? How the reification of scholars through multiple indicators (h-index etc.) does affect them? How do citation indexes change the game of publication? To what extent are we now in an era of "be cited or perish"? How do performance management systems change the relationship between scholars and the management of their institutions (Kure et al., 2021), and with what effects on scholars' well-being and meaningfulness of work? And finally what are the social and individual costs of repeated precarious jobs in research for young scholars who have not yet published enough to get a tenure-track position – not to mention those, in some disciplines like sociology where positions are scarce, who finally decide to give up the academic career?

This analysis lacks empirical material. Various case studies would help to understand how some aspects of the organizational context might untie the double bind – for instance, metacommunication about the contradictions (Venter et al., 2019). Interviewing various scholars in the same organization would also enable to shed light on individual characteristics (personality, trajectory and experience) that are likely to have an impact on the intensity of the relationship, on the perception of contradictions and rewards, and subsequently on the double bind effects.

Despite the imperfections of this article, we hope it provides critical scholars with food for thought. In putting some words and concepts on what, since decades, has been a recurring topic of informal chats in academia, this article also embodies a form of comment – thus hopefully partly relaxing the tensions of the double bind.

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