

# Wellbeing in Academia: Rethinking What We Have Normalized

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“[...] illness and health are manifestations of the social macrocosm.”

(Maté 2022, 198)

## Introduction

I volunteered to write a perspective for *Leviathan* with a focus on wellbeing in academia – a subject that has preoccupied me for years, both personally and institutionally. While concerns about wellbeing extend far beyond universities (see, e.g. Maté 2022), academia offers a particularly revealing microcosm of broader societal tendencies: overwork, competitive individualism, and the normalisation of chronic stress. As I write this piece, my reflections are necessarily grounded in personal experience. However, the aim is not to simply recount a private journey, but to use that journey as a lens through which we can examine structural features of academic life that seem to be rarely questioned and which are nevertheless widely accepted. The central question guiding this reflection is simple: *What have we normalised in academia that may, in fact, be detrimental to our wellbeing?* And further: *Does “normal” necessarily mean healthy?*

## Are we happy in academia?

I often ask colleagues what currently brings them the most satisfaction in their work (although I often use words such as “joy” and “happiness”) and I indeed tend to ask people I meet if they are happy and what it is that makes them happy. These questions are sometimes met with surprise. In academic environments saturated with metrics, deadlines, and performance indicators, explicit conversations about happiness can feel almost out of place. For me, the answer to whether I am happy as an academic is ultimately yes. However, this “yes” has not been stable or uncomplicated for me, and I have been re-evaluating my answer to this question on a very regular basis. There have been several points in my career when I came close to leaving academia altogether – not because of a lack of passion or because I found my work meaningless – but because of the cumulative strain of its work conditions.

This distinction is important. Disillusionment in academia may be misinterpreted as a loss of intellectual commitment. In my case, and in many conversations I have had with colleagues, the tension was not between passion and indifference, but between passion and sustainability. Loving one's work does not immunise one against burnout and the vast range of ways in which psychosomatic impact can manifest. Nor does professional "success" guarantee wellbeing. The question, then, is whether the current structures of academic institutions allow academic work to be carried out in ways that are sustainable.

## **The normalisation of overwork**

My trajectory into academia is not unusual: early aspiration, intensive training, geographic mobility, fixed-term contracts, and prolonged precarity. Following undergraduate and master's studies at Charles University, I completed a largely unfunded PhD at the University of Manchester. Financial survival during those years depended on hourly teaching contracts, short-term research assistantships, evening library shifts, and other piecemeal work. I worked every single day, felt guilty when I needed to take one day off in 2-3 weeks. After all this came consecutive fixed-term posts in different institutions and cities before eventually securing a permanent position at Aarhus University, in another country.

This pathway will sound familiar to many academics. It is also structurally revealing. Academic progression depends not only on competence and hard work, but on sustained overperformance in a highly competitive environment. Even then, permanence is uncertain. I have met many individuals whose minds I have considered absolutely brilliant and whose publication and teaching records were admirable. And yet, many of those did not succeed in becoming permanently employed.

Within this system, several patterns have become normalised:

- working beyond contracted hours as a matter of course
- treating weekends and workday evenings as "flexible" research time
- accepting unpaid or undercompensated labour
- prioritising responsiveness and availability as markers of commitment

Because many academics are deeply passionate about their work, this overextension is frequently self-reinforcing. The flexibility and autonomy we value can blur boundaries between work and non-work, making it difficult to identify when commitment becomes self-exploitation. Importantly, resistance to these norms is costly. Early in my career, I adopted strategies such as limiting email

access outside working hours. Even now, I explicitly state that I do not work evenings or weekends. Such boundary-setting requires energy and, crucially, a degree of job security. It is far easier to maintain limits once one holds a permanent position than during fixed-term employment, and even then it can demand a good amount of resilience, willpower, resistance, and therefore costs energy. This suggests that overwork in academia is not merely a matter of individual time management. It is structurally incentivised and unevenly distributed.

### **Administrative creep and invisible labour**

At my current institution, 40% of my own contracted time is supposed to be allocated to research. In practice, the more “successful” one becomes, the more additional tasks accumulate:

- reviewing articles and grant proposals (never paid)
- examining PhD theses (occasionally paid)
- serving on hiring and other committees (usually paid)
- writing reference letters (never paid)
- supporting prospective PhD applicants (never paid)
- delivering invited talks (practically never paid)

These tasks are essential to the functioning of academia. Yet they are frequently absorbed into research time, which in turn displaces the very activities by which research performance is evaluated. This creates a structural paradox: the system depends on voluntary academic labour, but rarely recognises its full temporal cost. Declining such requests can generate guilt, as most of us have benefited from the unpaid generosity of others. In this way, reciprocity becomes intertwined with pressure. We also depend on the accumulation of having done the tasks described above when applying for jobs, grants, and promotions. Again, this is not reducible to personal inefficiency. It reflects how academic labour is organised and valued.

### **Asymmetries in wellbeing**

Over recent years, universities have rightly increased their focus on student wellbeing. At my institution, exam schedules are structured to avoid overburdening students, and (some) attention is paid to teaching intensity and neurodiversity (although no one I know has done any teacher training course in this area or has been encouraged to). However, similar care is less systematically extended to teaching staff. Intensive teaching days, compressed grading timelines, and expectations

to work while ill are far from uncommon. In my own experience, raising concerns about such practices has sometimes been met with the observation that they are “not illegal” (when I pointed out that no one should ever be expected or asked to do eight hours of teaching within a single day). Legality, however, is a minimal standard. It is not synonymous with sustainability or health. This asymmetry raises broader questions about institutional responsibility. If we acknowledge that students are not machines, why do we often behave as though staff are? We would never expect a student to go to an oral exam if they are lying at home with a fever of 39 degrees of Celcius. So why was my request as an examiner in this position met with the administrative staff urging me to reconsider, while I had already made myself feel sufficiently guilty for being too unwell to have an informal conversation – let alone conduct an oral exam: “are you sure rescheduling because of your fever is what’s best for the students?”.

I have taken this issue up with the Committee for Diversity and Gender Equality at Arts at Aarhus University. I pointed out that the asymmetrical approach to the student versus teaching staff wellbeing actually presents a matter of inequality. After months of emailing, the last response I have obtained was that this is not a matter relevant for the Committee for Diversity and Gender Equality. It was pointed out to me that the committee deals with inequality issues.

Again, if we acknowledge that students are not machines, why do we often behave as though staff are? And furthermore: why are we so stubbornly defending the normalisation of this inequality that affects all teaching staff?

## **Inequality and power**

Wellbeing in academia is also shaped by inequality and power hierarchies. Gendered expectations of emotional labour, for instance, are well documented (e.g. Cole and Hassel 2017, Savigny 2014, Skorkjær Binderkrantz 2019; also Maté 2022, 141). Additionally, hierarchical relationships – between supervisors and doctoral students, between junior and senior staff – create vulnerabilities, particularly when institutional safeguards are weak or difficult to access. In environments where overwork and self-sacrifice are already normalised, raising concerns about harassment, exploitation, or unhealthy dynamics can feel professionally risky. The psychological cost of navigating such environments should not be underestimated.

Even in working environments that offer autonomy and flexibility, interpersonal dynamics can present serious challenges. Academic settings are not immune to difficult personalities – including individuals who exhibit traits of the so-called Dark Triad: Machiavellianism, narcissism, and subclinical psychopathy (Furnham, Richards, and Paulhus 2013). Power imbalances can magnify the impact of such traits, for example in relationships between PhD supervisors and

students, or junior and senior colleagues. Recognising these dynamics is crucial for protecting our wellbeing: prolonged exposure to manipulative or exploitative behavior is not only emotionally draining, but can also create physical stress signals that our bodies use to warn us something is wrong. Ultimately, these too can become normalised, which can lead to yet more physical and emotional stress.

My own journey toward a more reflective and health-oriented “yes” involved learning to identify these patterns and actively manage my interactions with individuals whose behavior threatened my wellbeing. I was relatively fortunate in that the management was keen to find resolutions. Not everyone is. And even in my case, this took years to resolve fully – despite having already secured a permanent and more secure position. Periods of repeated and prolonged exposure to stressors can be bad enough in and of themselves, but there is a side of this which can get overlooked after the stressors are considered to be removed. Research on wellbeing has demonstrated plentifully that recovering from trauma and chronic stress requires a significantly longer period than that during which the trauma and stress were inflicted (e.g. Bryce and Conrad 2018, Haynes et al. 1991; and look for articles on the so-called allostatic load as well).

## **Towards a healthier normal**

Despite the critique above, I remain in academia because I value its intellectual autonomy, its capacity for deep inquiry, and the integration of teaching and research. The goal, therefore, is not withdrawal, but transformation.

If overwork, administrative creep, unrecognised emotional labour, and working through illness have become normal, we must ask whether a different normal is possible. But where could we start?

- explicitly accounting for the time required for reviewing, mentoring, and committee work, insisting on only doing the number of hours that a specific task is supposed to take
  - and being consistent in doing so with the number of hours that are realistic
  - and being consistent in doing so with work quality which is equivalent to the number of hours we have to work with: if we are paid to spend 2 hours on a task and know the quality will not be very high because 2 hours is not sufficient for that, we need to be ok with that (but most of us, of course, are not, which is one of the reasons the current system can keep sustaining itself at the expense of our wellbeing)

- integrating wellbeing and boundary-setting into doctoral training as well as regular training of staff members, and doing so in a way which is not superficial
- recognising emotional labour in workload models
- establishing clearer, enforceable norms around sick leave and teaching intensity
- creating safer and more accessible reporting mechanisms for power abuse and making these part of obligatory training for PhD students as well as staff members
- and perhaps one of the key things we should all be able to engage in on a regular basis: having more conversations about whether we feel happy and healthy and why (not)

Structural problems require structural responses. Individual resilience, while valuable, is not sufficient. As a colleague who I respect a great deal once told me: ‘your job won’t love you back’<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> It was the scholar Yonatan Ungermann Goldshtein.

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