

World view



By Natalia
Ingebretsen
Kucirkova

Academia's culture of overwork almost broke me

For young immigrant women, the pressures of early-career research are particularly severe. It doesn't have to be that way.

I left Slovakia to study in the United Kingdom at the age of 18, with a small suitcase and big hopes. I wanted to take advantage of opportunities that my parents had only been able to dream of growing up under a communist regime. But never in my wildest dreams did I think I would become a professor before the age of 35.

I got here by elbow grease – and long hours. I worked feverishly to get funded PhD and postdoctoral positions. The stiff competition for grants and positions at high-ranking universities helped me to crystallize my research ideas in my field of early education and child development. But to stand out from my peers, I doubled my working hours. It wasn't uncommon for me to work 12 hours a day, 7 days a week, for months at a time.

More hours meant more results. Seeing my studies on digital reading translated into apps for children or family websites motivated me to do more. I put my work on a pedestal, often at the cost of my health and social life.

I thought I was the exception. But when I read an article containing interviews with five successful female psychology researchers (P. Alexander *et al. Educ. Psychol. Rev.* **33**, 763–795; 2021), I realized that this is the norm for top-performing academics. I greatly admire the interviewees and share their passion for their work. But I now realize that, by hiding behind passion, I was excusing my contribution to a toxic burnout culture in research. And for me and many others like me – female, immigrant, non-native English speakers – the pressures are even greater. It's time to speak out.

I made the greatest sacrifices during my years on temporary postdoc and lectureship contracts, when not publishing an extra paper could have cost me the grant I needed to secure next year's salary. A mentor told me that the passport to academia is publications, so I filled every spare moment with writing. A doctor told me ice would ease my permanent carpal tunnel syndrome, so I typed wearing iced wrist splints.

Not being a native English speaker, I had to put in extra hours for each paper. The fear of being misunderstood by using the wrong word added to the stress of conference presentations and translated into regular pounding headaches and fatigue, which I still experience.

The pressure to perform sucked me into a negative spiral. When I felt stressed, I doubted myself, feared saying 'no', overcompensated by saying 'yes' to extra tasks, and became more stressed. I cut back on spending time with friends and on sleep. My then-boyfriend told me I was married to my computer and cut our holiday short

I now realize that, by hiding behind passion, I was excusing my contribution to a toxic burnout culture in research."

when he saw me typing a paper on the beach. The ticket inspector on the late-night commuter train knew me by name because I regularly overslept my stop. When I had a bout of autoimmune illness, my family was not surprised.

I see now that my choice to work hard was fuelled not only by my love for the work but also by systemic factors. Studies show that the risk of burnout is higher among young researchers (A. Boone *et al. Front. Psychol.* **13**, 839728; 2022), as well as among female academics from marginalized groups, because there is greater pressure to perform. Although that includes me, I can't speak to the even greater pressures that affect many young women, among them those from minority racial groups, those juggling motherhood with early-career research, those from the LGBTQ community, and scientists from countries where there is extreme gender discrimination or violent conflict.

Through a combination of hard work and luck, I got a permanent position early in my career. But the workload has only grown heavier as I have climbed the career ladder, with increasing requests for mentoring, article and grant reviews, departmental duties, committee memberships, and voluntary contributions of time and expertise to professional societies. The costs of making a mistake are also higher: if my lower performance delays a large grant, that can jeopardize several people's salaries.

But my survival anxiety has lessened. Starting a family and moving to Norway, a country known for a better work-life balance than the United Kingdom, helped. Beginning to take my childhood hobby of writing poetry seriously was the best thing I ever did for my mental health. And I have learnt to manage my calendar better, blocking out time to write and not feeling guilty for setting out-of-office replies.

The extreme workload of my early career was unhealthy for me, and it's unhealthy for others. I want to undo my contribution to this toxic culture of overwork, especially for groups that are disproportionately affected.

I see it as my responsibility to promote definitions of academic success that are not tied to extreme working hours. In the book *Inspirational Women in Academia: Supporting Careers and Improving Minority Representation* (2023), my colleague Loleta Fahad, who is head of career development at University College London, and I interview female academics and administrators. We openly share where we failed, what we wish we had known when we started working at a university and what those in power could do to address systemic discrimination.

The pursuit of science lends itself to fervour: there is no ceiling to knowledge, and the discovery process can be all-consuming. But being passionate about our work should not be equated with working extreme hours. And it should not put extra pressure on women from marginalized backgrounds.

Natalia Ingebretsen Kucirkova is a professor of child development at the University of Stavanger, Norway, and at the Open University, UK. e-mail: natalia.kucirkova@uis.no