Speaking Out

Organization
1–8

DOI: 10.1177/13505084251383285
journals.sagepub.com/home/org
Sage

Under pressure: Becoming the good enough academic

Milena Tekeste
New York University Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

Abstract

Early Career Researchers (ECRs) often face enormous pressures in academia, particularly in the relentless pursuit of being perceived as a "good" academic. Drawing from personal experiences, I recount a moment of acute realization: I responded to an email requesting further manuscript revisions all the while I was undergoing a medical procedure. I focus on how ECRs often go to extreme lengths to meet professional expectations by tracing my own journey – from completing PhD studies to navigating academia. Reflecting on publishing demands, attending conferences, and seeking mentorships, I critique toxic cultures that not only valorize overwork but also ignore the detrimental impact it can have on physical and mental well-being. I also examine the implicit and explicit pressures to conform to academic norms, arguing for a re-evaluation of what it means to be a "good" academic. Overall, I call for creating a more supportive and sustainable academic culture as we grow to embody a good academic.

Keywords

Academic socialization, ideal academic, intersectionality

As a researcher, I explore the lived experiences of women in the workplace. I am particularly interested in understanding how highly qualified women reconcile work and non-work demands. In an interview I conducted during my PhD program, a female lawyer described balancing impossibly high demands at work alongside showing commitment to the profession. In one instance, she had even responded to client emails and stayed in touch with her team while she was in labor with her first child. I remember finishing the interview and thinking: "That could never be me. Working while in hospital?"

Three years later, I found myself in the exact same position, admitted to hospital for surgery requiring full anesthesia. If all went well, I would be released that day, and I would be able to resume normal activities within the week. A friend, who is also a researcher, accompanied me. On the way to the waiting/recovery room, I was checking my emails one last time, and I saw a message

Corresponding author:
Milena Tekeste, Social Sciences, New York University Abu Dhabi, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.
Email: m.tekeste@nyu.edu

from the section editor of a paper that had been in the pipeline for just over a year. Hoping for a confirmation of acceptance, I was disappointed to read that the section editor was requesting another revision. As I lay in a hospital bed, with a nurse trying to find a vein for the cannula, I read out the comments to my friend and messaged my co-authors to inform them of the news. How was I feeling? Disappointed, angry, frustrated, and, most of all, exhausted.

After being wheeled into the recovery room post-surgery, I immediately messaged my co-authors, suggesting how we could split up the work. The absurdity of my behavior did not even occur to me until one co-author in the group chat remarked: "The doctors are working on you, while you are working on the revision." She was right! Even amidst surgery, my biggest concern was how to tackle the revision.

With my co-author spelling out the this behavior, I – a researcher focusing on flexible working and an advocate for work-life balance – had to ask myself, "How did I become this person?"

Being a "good" academic

In short, I was socialized. I was explicitly and implicitly trained to behave in a certain way so I could thrive in the academy. For the past year, I worked relentlessly to build my research portfolio. I had demonstrated that I was a "good academic" by ensuring that I had multiple papers at varying stages of completion: from data collection and analyses to manuscripts in progress, submitted, or under revision. I followed the blueprint – pre-established rules (Prasad, 2013) – that were enumerated by colleagues and mentors, and through institutionally-designed training programs. I sought to embody the ideal academic (Acker, 1990). In this role, I was disembodied from other life responsibilities, demonstrated that I was endlessly available to work, and showed full commitment to the profession, traveling whenever needed (Sang et al., 2015), and I reduced outside interests to focus on my work. By embodying this type of professional rhetoric, I hoped to demonstrate that I fit in (Trinh et al., 2022).

Over and over, I was told which characteristics and behaviors were a sign of a "good" academic, both explicitly and implicitly (Sang et al., 2015). I became acutely aware of the power of the implicit when I observed who was invited to job talks: PhD students from elite US institutions, academics who had at least a paper (or a R&R) in an Association of Business Schools (ABS) 4 journal, and researchers focusing on positivist research. Institution also signaled who were good academics through the guest speakers that they invited to research group seminars: mostly white men working in elite US institutions who were – or had been – on the editorial board of one of the top American ABS 4* journals, a very narrow definition of success (Prasad, 2013). As a Black woman who had graduated from a university based in the UK (*not* Oxford, Cambridge, or the London School of Economics and Political Science), I always felt a lack of equivalency between my PhD and those of my US colleagues. Additionally, lacking publications in US journals, I did not feel good enough. I felt as though I had to not only prove my eligibility as a member of the elite but also establish that I *belonged* due to my intersectional identity.

Multiple academics (e.g. Edwards et al., 2024) have highlighted the difficulties women face as they embody the rhetoric of the ideal academic, particularly in terms of career, maternity, and potential part-time work that all impact career mobility. However, race is also an important consideration with the US having only 3% black female tenured professors (National Centre for Education Statistics [NCES], 2024) and the UK 3% black faculty members overall (HESA, 2024), racial marginalization cannot be denied and I knew that the intersection of my race and gender were obstacles to a sense of belonging in this profession.

Rather than focusing on race and gender, as presented by multiple scholars (e.g. Górska et al., 2021; Joshi et al., 2015; Rollock, 2023; Smith et al., 2019), I highlight a particularly illuminating text by Professor Keon West:

> People sometimes ask me how I deal with racism, and I often respond that I just unambiguously outperform all the White people that I have to compete with (. . .). That strategy has worked well for me so far, but it's hard to explain the immense, grinding pressure of always having to be clearly unambiguously, perfectly good, or risk being judged, even without any evidence at all, as unqualified, guilty and bad. So long as every application I make for every job is unambiguously stellar, I stand a good chance of getting it. But let there be any ambiguity, any room for discretion or interpretation, and the White candidates will reap the benefits of assumed superiority while the ethnic minority candidates, including me, will be assumed to be weak and unqualified until definitely proven otherwise. (West, 2025: 115)

I had to become "unambiguously perfectly good" to be a tenure track professor and as a result adhered to – and never questioned – the socialization. Since completing my PhD, my roles had always included tasks typical of tenure-track professors, such as teaching, researching, serving on search committees, and even acting as an associate editor. However, I was still unsuccessful. There was also the added pressure of constant reminders that I should soon achieve a tenure-track position. The longer I was out of the PhD, the worse my possibilities would become, as it was a clear signal to the wider market. As a result, every year I was not on the market or unsuccessful in the market, my chances of getting a research-focused role were increasingly diminished.

I am acutely aware that pressures will not ease once I achieve a tenure-track position. Embodying the image of the ideal worker tends to follow individuals throughout their careers. Among my tenure-track colleagues, I have often overheard phrases like "the clock is ticking, my papers must come out." I have also witnessed relentless comparisons of who has done more and who deserves promotion—from ECRs to associate professors, as well as observed women being denied tenure, their tenure being questioned or women struggling re-enter academia after taking time off to care for children. All these women were deemed unsuitable (Edwards et al. 2024; Sang et al., 2015), which induced an internalized, palpable anxiety: I must work and publish to avoid diminishing my chances to make it in academia. Through these experiences, my socialization began to enact certain academic-related career scripts (Prasad, 2013) – you must work incredibly hard, be endlessly available, and constantly publish to survive in academia. *But it was not always this way.*

Becoming a "good" academic

When I completed my PhD 2 years earlier in the UK, I had little understanding of academic life. Two years of my PhD journey were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The institution was so overwhelmed with unanticipated changes – from moving in-class instruction to online studies, to supporting PhD students during an extreme event – that preparing students for the academic labor market was no longer the primary focus. Perhaps a blessing in disguise, my main focus in the final 2 years of my PhD was completing the PhD, with little or no expectations to attend virtual conferences, apply for grants, or publish papers (Prasad, 2013). I thus entered the academic employment market unaware of expectations and the nature of the ideal worker (Sang et al., 2015). To be considered "good", I believed I had to publish, teach, and engage in some service. Some of my academic friends had these expectations explicitly spelled out in their employment contracts, such as 50% teaching, 30% research, and 20% service, or something along those lines.

It was not until my first full-time academic position in a UK institution – that followed US tenure and publication standards – that a colleague explained the journal-ranking system. I learned

publishing in *specific* journals would lead to tenure. It was the first time that anyone had sat me down and explained "the many forms of institutionalized pressures for research output" (Prasad, 2013: 936). I laughed in disbelief, asking: "Who comes up with these rankings, who decides which journals are 'good enough' for promotion, who decides how many papers I need to publish, and, perhaps most importantly, how do I get published in these journals?" I learned that I first needed to find a good mentor, but, more importantly, I needed to learn how to play the game (Bal et al., 2024; Prasad, 2013).

After this conversation, I set up a meeting with a very senior and well-known female colleague whom I held in high regard and whose work had been integral in my undergraduate, postgraduate, and PhD studies. In our first meeting, which lasted approximately 15 minutes, she offered me three main insights: join the Academy of Management (AOM), set up non-negotiable, weekly writing days and ideally have these days back-to-back (e.g. Thursday and Friday), and don't be afraid to send papers to her for feedback prior to submission.

I was so relieved. Her advice empowered me and helped me control my workload. I set teaching days, time for service, and two, non-negotiable and back-to-back writing days. While progress was slow, I felt I was doing something right. I had clear work-life boundaries: I was working on one paper at a time, determined to become a "good" academic.

To learn more, I registered for a 1-week training program (full-time on site abroad) for qualitative researchers. This intensive week-long experience involved reading well over 60 papers. Undeterred, I organized childcare for my son and registered, in hopes of learning more, and improving my researching and writing skills. Resolve gave way to resignation by day three of the training. I was set on repeat: reading prior to the sessions, actively participating during the sessions, and finishing the day by reading late into the night. In between sessions, I was calling home to check on my son and his childcare arrangements, ensuring that he arrived at school safely and attended his after-school activities. Managing the workload of training is hard; managing the workload in combination with orchestrating childcare from another country is a task I do not wish upon anyone. Nevertheless, what I learned was not only productive but also eye-opening.

During the training sessions, I was introduced to various theoretical and methodological avenues whereby I could contribute to the academy. I also learned how to strategically develop research programs rather than simply address research questions, the meaning of journal rankings, indexes, and citation scores, where to publish (i.e. ones associated with being a good academic), and the value of journals.

It also taught me that my value within the academy is determined by these metrics, my publications are my currency, and my presence in certain journals determines my worth within the wider academic industry (rather than my teaching and service). And what happens if you do not publish in these journals? *You perish* (Dany et al., 2011).

Following these training sessions, the strategies of the senior female colleague no longer mattered. Writing two consecutive days was clearly not enough. I needed to relentlessly read and write and submit. In hindsight, little did I know that this week of intense training was just a taste of what my academic life would become.

A few months later, I accepted a non-tenure track position at a US institution. Here, my new employer emphasized that I needed to work on my publication record, particularly focusing on US journals to be potentially considered for tenure track positions. I was regularly reminded that publications were "my currency," determining my value and importance, and opening the door to tenure in elite institutions around the world. If I did not succeed, I wouldn't survive the academic tournament, a game that grants vertical mobility and signals academic excellence (Edwards et al., 2024). Hoping to find a mentor who could act as a doorkeeper for future publications in one of the US journals, I soon learned that none of my senior colleagues within my network had a single

paper in any of these journals. Surprised (yet undeterred), I attended the *83rd Annual Meeting of the Academy of Management* (AOM) in 2023. Being it was my first, I attended every session for Early Career Researchers (ECRs), every "meet-the-editor" session, two "paper-in-the-rough" sessions, and 1-2-1 meetings with editors to discuss papers for submission. I took the conference very seriously, attending in person every day, listening intently from eight in the morning until late at night. If I had to describe AOM annual meetings, I would cast them as the "Golden Globes" of management research: not only numerous awards and presentations but also a whole lot of performativity.

Amidst all these activities, I networked, making myself *known*. However, I felt very awkward during these exchanges with powerful individuals who were chosen for one's own personal gain. People knew not only *who was who* (though this is not necessarily problematic) but also *who published where.*

I left "*the* AOM" a bit overwhelmed by new expectations and factors that played a significant role in becoming a good academic. It wasn't setting clear schedules, as noted by my first female mentor. It wasn't only writing strong papers and understanding publication metrics, as presented during the training sessions. It was, rather, deciphering invisible norms, practices, and knowledge about others. This knowledge would help me build my invisible college. Now I knew that it was not only important to work relentlessly hard but also important to know academy networks, cliques, and powerhouses if I wanted to get one step closer to a tenure track position and become a good academic.

It didn't occur to me until much later that, during these five intense days at the AOM annual meeting, I had been socialized among an academic elite (Bal et al., 2024). While I was already part of the elite since I was able to afford to attend the AOM, my attendance brought me closer to individuals who worked in prestigious institutions, published exclusively in top-tier American journals, had a strong personal brand, and were visible and known among other academics. These successful individuals were winners of the *academic tournament* – through the currency of their publications and the networks they had built or absorbed through supervisory teams and institutional associations.

I returned home, setting a goal of submitting one paper per month. I communicated my intentions to my more senior colleagues and was applauded for my dedication to the profession. I felt as though that I had now cracked the code; approval seemed to be confirmed by no one objecting to my stated intentions. And I felt like all the pieces of the puzzle were coming together – the insights of my female colleague, the learnings from the intensive training program, and the experiences at the AOM annual meeting. I finally felt like I was successfully playing the game; I finally understood what needed to be done.

I wrote every day, late into the evening, and even on weekends. My laptop joined me everywhere: my son's sports practices, coffee dates with friends, medical appointments, and car service. My laptop was inseparable from family life. I also made financial sacrifices, outsourcing many tasks that could prevent me from focusing on research and writing. I paid more for childcare for my teenage son than I done when he was a toddler, I outsourced most of the housework, and I rarely cooked. During school holidays and conferences – which fell during the school term and holidays, I sent my son to my parents. I had decided it was a case of "either-or" – I was a present parent, or I was becoming a good academic. There was no in between. Household chores would not help me to embody the ideal academic. Indeed, as I played the game, my other roles became invisible. I networked extensively (virtually and in person), participating in many small talks where I received the oddest ECR advice: family planning only when tenured, and delivery dates in late May and June, or during sabbaticals. All efforts were directed at preventing career disruptions. While these

messages all came from other female colleagues, I still listened to and silently judged—them with great discomfort.

In addition to outsourcing household and parenting duties, I also began to adopt many unethical practices. I reviewed the papers of others in hopes of accelerating the review processes of my own. I asked more senior colleagues to add their names (all of them declined) to my submissions to reduce the chances of getting a "desk reject," advice I received at AOM to build my invisible college (Bal et al., 2024).

I had convinced myself that this short-term sacrifice—perhaps for 2 years—would ensure an easier start and maintenance of my career.

I was wrong. While I now have over 15 journal articles from ABS 2 to ABS 4 in the pipeline, only 2 have been published to date. I underestimated the wider, systemic issues within academia that would slow my progress toward becoming a good academic. Editors can struggle to find reviewers, reviewers can be problematic (Krlev and Spicer, 2023), collaborators may not submit their reviews on time, and issues with journal governance may arise (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2024; Tekeste and Özbilgin, 2025). Unpredictability caused all my careful planning to fall out of sync. Even though I had the blueprint—intentions, skills, and networks—and had made the required sacrifices to become a good academic, I still had become a victim. Inherent and rampant inefficiencies delayed the goal of making my invisible labor *visible*.

Over the years, I often felt depleted in my resources. And I often felt neither good enough at work nor good enough elsewhere (Edwards et al., 2024). However, I was still determined to prove that I fit, and that I belonged.

Embodying the "good enough" academic—A way forward

A few days after the surgery, I boarded my 15-hour flight to my second AOM conference. As I squeezed in between two other passengers, I reflected not only on the message sent by my dear friend and co-author but also two long years of proving that I belonged and that I was a good academic. I realized: *this is not worth the sacrifice*.

It was not my colleagues encouraging me to stop doing "this type of work" (i.e. critical management studies; see Prasad, 2013), my son telling family friends at dinner parties that "all my mum does is work" nor my weight fluctuating by 5 kg every 3 months (Newark, 2024). It was rather the longest red-eye flight of my life, when I sat in silence as I evaluated and reevaluated my life, that I came to the bitter realization that – in the eyes of the system – I would never be good enough.

Shortly after the conference, I attended a guest talk by Dr. Ramani. I had come across Dr. Ramani's YouTube channel a few times over the years, where she extensively examines narcissism and narcissistic relationships. I was astounded when she introduced the concept of narcissistic organizations. Individuals within narcissistic employment relationships surrender everything to attain a sense of belonging and appreciation. Like a narcissistic partner, narcissistic organizations do not view employees as "good enough," and they never appreciate employees nor their work, even as they extract all resources that employees can offer. And in the end, they always ask for more (Plotnikof and Utoft, 2022).

Prior to this talk, I had blamed my mid-level and senior colleagues for making my life in the academy so hard. I was perplexed why they could not see my struggle. Why didn't they help me, like "good elders," ensuring that "the next generation of business scholars of color will not merely survive, but live, learn, and work in environments that sustain their knowledge and desire their truth" (Dar et al., 2021: 702). My moment of epiphany was prompted by Dr. Ramani: *we are all victims of the system*. We work to survive in the academy (Tekeste et al., 2025) by playing the game (Prasad, 2013). We hope to win the lottery (Sang et al., 2015) by building an invisible college,

proving that we are "good enough" (Edwards et al., 2024). For those who can embody the narrative of the ideal academic (Sang et al., 2015) rewards are ample. And for those who don't? These academics must find their own alternate path (Bristow et al., 2025).

One alternate path is presented by Edwards et al. (2024), who stated that the academy should not penalize the "good enough." Work matters, but individuals and their families matter as well. Sang et al. (2015) also encouraged more fruitful discourses that reveal not only academic lived experience but also active resistance. Reflecting on my own experiences within academia, I thus call for collective sharing of our experiences, resisting neoliberal and patriarchal norms, bringing inequities to light, and initiating conversations about malpractice (Tekeste and Özbilgin, 2025). However, above all, I call for all academics to avoid *losing themselves* (Prasad, 2013). We have always been good enough, we have always belonged to our institutional spaces and professional environments, and we have never needed to adopt entrenched – and often exploitative – ways of engaging and belonging.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Milena Tekeste https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7807-0506

References

Acker, Joan (1990) 'Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations', *Gender & Society* 4(2): 139–58.

Bal, P. Matthijs, van Rossenberg, Yvonne and Orhan, Mehmet A. (2024) 'Manifestation of Academic Rackets in Management Research Through Early Career Sessions at Academic Conferences', *Management Learning* 56(2): 254–83.

Bristow, Alexandra, Robinson, Sarah and Ratle Olivier (2025) 'Doing Academia Differently: A Provocation Review', *Management Learning* 56(1): 99–106.

Dany, Françoise, Louvel, Severine and Valette, Annick (2011) 'Academic Careers: The Limits of the "Boundaryless Approach" and the Power of Promotion Scripts', *Human Relations* 64(7): 971–96.

Dar, Sadhvi, Liu, Helena, Martinez Dy, Angela and Brewis, Deborah N. (2021) 'The Business School is Racist: Act Up!', *Organization* 28(4): 695–706.

Edwards, Michaela, Ridgway, Maranda, Chen, Gwen, Cooper, Emily and Pass, Sarah (2024) '(In)Visible Working Mama Drama: From Excellent to "Good Enough" Academia and (M)Others', *British Journal of Management* 36(2): 560–70.

Górska, Anna Maria, Kulicka, Karolina, Staniszewska, Zuzanna and Dobija, Dorota (2021) 'Deepening Inequalities: What Did COVID-19 Reveal About the Gendered Nature of Academic Work?', *Gender, Work & Organization* 28(4): 1546–61.

HESA (2024) 'Higher Education Staff Statistics: UK, 2022/23', Retrieved August 5, 2025, from https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/16-01-2024/sb267-higher-education-staff-statistics

Joshi, Aparna, Neely, Brett, Emrich, Cynthia, Griffiths, Dorothy and George, Griffiths (2015) 'Gender Research in AMJ: An Overview of Five Decades of Empirical Research and Calls to Action: Thematic Issue on Gender in Management Research', *Academy of Management Journal* 58(5): 1459–75.

Krlev, Gorgi and Spicer, André (2023) 'Reining in Reviewer Two: How to Uphold Epistemic Respect in Academia', *Journal of Management Studies* 60(6): 1624–32.

National Centre for Education Statistics (2024) 'Characteristics of Post-Secondary Faculty', Retrieved August 4, 2025, from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/csc

Newark, Daniel A. (2024) 'Food and Fat at Work: Eighty-Three Moments from a Binge Eater's Professional Life', *Academy of Management Discoveries* 10: 169–91.

Ozkazanc-Pan, Banu (2024) ‘A Reflection on Governance, Ethics and Intellectual Boundary Enforcement in Academic Journals’, *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*. Published online before print December 24, doi: 10.1108/EDI-09-2024-0421.

Plotnikof, Mie and Utoft, Ea Høg (2022) ‘The “New Normal” of Academia in Pandemic Times: Resisting Toxicity Through Care’, *Gender, Work & Organization* 29(4): 1259–71.

Prasad, Ajnesh (2013) ‘Playing the Game and Trying Not to Lose myself: A Doctoral Student’s Perspective on the Institutional Pressures for Research Output’, *Organization* 20(6): 936–48.

Rollock, Nicola (2023) ‘“I Would Have Become Wallpaper Had Racism Had its Way”: Black Female Professors, Racial Battle Fatigue, and Strategies for Surviving Higher Education’, *Peabody Journal of Education* 96(2): 206–217.

Sang, Katherine, Powell, Abigail, Finkel, Rebecca and Richards, James (2015) ‘“Being an Academic is Not a 9–5 Job”: Long Working Hours and the “Ideal Worker” in UK Academia’, *Labour & Industry: A Journal of the Social and Economic Relations of Work* 25(3): 235–49.

Smith, Alexis Nicole, Watkins, Marla Baskerville, Ladge, Jamie J. and Carlton, Pamela (2019) ‘Making the Invisible Visible: Paradoxical Effects of Intersectional Invisibility on the Career Experiences of Executive Black Women’, *Academy of Management Journal* 62(6): 1705–734.

Tekeste, Milena and Özbilgin, Mustafa F. (2025) ‘Anatomy of a Mass Resignation: Moral Entrepreneurship and Academic Outsiders Within’, *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal* 44(9): 42–52.

Tekeste, Milena, Zakariah, Amalina, Azer, Evronia and Salahuddin, Sarah (2025) ‘Surviving Academia: Narratives on Identity Work and Intersectionality’, *Gender, Work & Organization* 32(3): 1329–48.

Trinh, Mai P., Kirsch, Robert, Castillo, Elizabeth A. and Bates, Denise E. (2022) ‘Forging Paths to Interdisciplinary Research for Early Career Academics’, *Academy of Management Learning & Education* 21: 318–35.

West, Keon (2025) *The Science of Racism: Everything You Need to Know but Probably Don’t—Yet*. New York, NY: Abrams Press.

Author biography

Milena Tekeste, PhD, is a Scholar of international human resource management whose research explores gender and the future of work. Her work has been published in journals including Human Resource Management Journal and Gender, Work & Organization.