

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Work-Life (Re)Negotiation for Mid-Career Faculty

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Abstract:

While working towards tenure, faculty members are rewarded for enacting ideal worker norms (Acker, 1990) or prioritizing work resulting in high levels and quality of production over other components of one's life. Striving to meet ideal worker norms has real costs to faculty members who may experience high levels of stress, negative health outcomes, or strained relationships. However, failing to comply with these norms also has implications and may impede individual's career advancement. Having achieved promotion and tenure, mid-career faculty are uniquely positioned to renegotiate their relationship to ideal worker norms in the academy and can use their agency to contest them. Accordingly, this chapter examines the construct of the ideal worker (Acker, 1990) and how it affects faculty work before providing insight on how mid-career faculty may change their relationship with ideal worker norms and notions of productivity in their lives and at their institutions.

Running title: WORK-LIFE RE(NEGOTIATION)

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What does it take for faculty to earn promotion and tenure? This is a question that graduate students and early career tenure-eligible faculty constantly ask themselves as they contemplate and navigate their career pathways. Although many faculty handbooks indicate that promotion to associate professor with tenure is earned through excellence in teaching, research, and service (Gardner & Veliz, 2014; Lester & Sallee, 2017; Miller, 1987), at some institutions there is ambiguity in what constitutes excellence and the metrics by which it is measured. Without clear definitions and metrics of excellence, the standards for promotion and tenure are often gauged through what faculty produce and the extent to which these products are considered valuable by one's colleagues (Gonzales & Terosky, 2016; Miller, 1987; O'Meara, 2011; Zambrana, 2018). For example, faculty research productivity is often gauged by the number of accepted publications, the prestige or impact of publication venues, and the amount of grant money received.

However, it is not always clear how many publications or grants are needed to receive tenure. The lack of clarity about what is "enough" to earn promotion with tenure creates and perpetuates a culture of constant working and doing for many faculty members (O'Meara et al., 2019; Sullivan, 2014). Without a clear indicator of whether or not early career tenure-eligible faculty have done "enough" to earn promotion and tenure, they are likely to continue working and working and working to the benefit of the institution and to their own detriment. Concurrently, they may wonder if they are "enough" to be in the academy (Shahjahan, 2020; Zambrana, 2018). In effect, the ever-present yet unspoken expectation to work and to produce pressures faculty to be the ideal worker (Acker, 1990; Williams, 1989), or someone who is willing and able to constantly work, as they pursue career

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advancement. Furthermore, the pressures to be the ideal worker or the ideal faculty member are amplified for those who must produce while navigating an academy that propagates systems of oppression (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012; Lester & Sallee, 2017; Zambrana, 2018).

After earning promotion and tenure, mid-career faculty navigate new forms of ambiguity as they determine and work toward their goals in this next phase of their careers (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2016). The pressure to be ideal worker and the constraints of systems of oppression do not fade as individuals pursue promotion to full professor or new opportunities as an administrative leader. However, mid-career faculty have been judged by their colleagues as having done “enough” to earn tenure and may be in a unique position to renegotiate their relationship with work and the extent to which they fulfill and perpetuate ideal worker norms (Acker, 1990; Williams, 1989). Accordingly, in this chapter I examine the construct of the ideal worker and how it affects faculty members. Then, I explore mid-career faculty careers and the potential shift of one’s relationship to ideal worker norms post-tenure. Finally, I provide recommendations to individual faculty members, departmental leaders, and institutions with the aim of shifting, resisting, and dismantling ideal worker norms in the academy.

Overview of the Ideal Worker

Feminist scholars Joan Williams (1989) and Joan Acker (1990) developed the notion of the ideal worker to highlight gendered divisions of labor that centralize men and created and sustained social inequalities. According to Williams (1989), “Western wage labor is premised on an ideal worker with no child care responsibilities” (p. 882). Acker (1990) elaborated further noting that the ideal worker “is a disembodied worker who exists only for the work. Such a hypothetical worker cannot have other imperatives of existence that impinge upon the job” (p. 149). In effect, the ideal worker is someone who devotes their time and energy fully to work and who does not have outside commitments or distractions. Both Williams (1989) and Acker (1990) asserted that men are rewarded for being the ideal worker given societal expectations of them to be providers while women “choose”

to deviate from ideal worker norms since they are expected to be caretakers, which conflicts with devoting oneself fully to work.

While the notion of the ideal worker initially attended to gender inequalities, Acker (2006) noted this concept is also used to perpetuate other forms of oppression. They argued that ideal worker norms are used to create and sustain “inequality regimes, defined as loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender, and racial inequalities within particular organizations” (Acker, 2006, p. 443). Organizational rules, policies, practices, and standards are designed to reward those who fulfill expectations of being the ideal worker and penalize those who cannot or are unwilling to give their full selves to work. Although the ideal worker is described as disembodied, the realities of the ideal worker are reflected in the experiences of those who are “White, male, cisgender, heterosexual, and/or middle-class people without disabilities or familial caregiving responsibilities” (Perez, 2021, p. 98). Ideal worker norms are not identity and power neutral, and they can have a profound impact on individuals’ personal and professional experiences.

Faculty Members as Ideal Workers

As previously noted, the pressure to be the ideal worker is embedded into the academy. The pressure to produce to advance one’s career can have many negative effects on faculty members. For example, internal and external pressure to constantly work can create high levels of stress for faculty (Lindholm & Szelenyi, 2008; Shahjahan, 2020), which can negatively affect individuals’ well-being (Shahjahan, 2020). Since many faculty members have the agency to control their time, they benefit from the flexibility and self-directed nature of the work. Yet, they must concurrently manage expectations to constantly work, and it is not unusual for faculty members to express feeling of guilt and shame for “not writing enough” or “not getting enough done” at any given point of time since in concept they have ample time to work. The structure of faculty work and the murkiness of what constitutes “enough” coupled with expectations to be the ideal worker and the ideal faculty member can amplify anxiety and stress in what is already a demanding profession.

Furthermore, the specter of the ideal worker can push faculty to feel as though they need to prioritize their academic careers over other components of their lives. For example, Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2016) described academic mothers as stuck “at the intersection of ideal worker norms that assume a complete focus on work, intensive mothering norms that assume total dedication to family, and societal norms that grant unprecedented access to women in the workplace” (p. 12). They found that women faculty members navigated competing demands as they pursued their careers and cared for children or elders, which often led to delaying or shifting their professional goals (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012, 2016). While the aforementioned flexibility of faculty work was beneficial to their participants, they lamented “having a workload that never ends” and feeling like “there is just not enough time to accomplish all the tasks that need to be accomplished” (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012, p. 55). Though academic mothers are more harshly affected by ideal worker norms, academic fathers are not immune to the tensions between work and family. Sallee (2012) found that academic fathers also struggled to manage expectations to constantly work and to be engaged parents. Sadly, participants’ commitments to academia were doubted when they used family leave policies or attended to their children’s needs. In essence, Sallee’s (2012) participants were judged for not adhering to ideal worker norms and societal norms for men to be breadwinners.

The strain of trying to fulfill ideal worker norms and the penalties for not doing so are amplified for those who must produce while navigating an academy that propagates racism, sexism, cissexism, classism, ableism, heterosexism, and other forms of oppression (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012; Lester & Sallee, 2017; Zambrana, 2018). Scholars have highlighted the extra labor that many racially minoritized faculty engage in to support Students of Color and diversity initiatives at predominantly White institutions (Griffin et al., 2013; Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012; Stanley, 2006; Turner, 2002). While this work can have important outcomes for students, it is often invisible and is not valued in the same way as research productivity, which can detract from racially minoritized faculty members’ opportunities for career advancement (Turner, 2002; Zambrana, 2018). In other words, improving the experiences of racially minoritized students and colleagues is rarely viewed as

being aligned with fulfilling ideal worker norms in a system that generally values research over teaching and service.

Faculty Resistance of Ideal Worker Norms

Given the profound negative effects that ideal worker norms propagate, there have been increasing calls to resist these standards and to create better work-life integration in the academy. Berg and Seeber (2016) called upon faculty to become “slow professors” (p. xvii) who challenge the pace of work and focus on production in the academy. They argued that “By taking the time for reflection and dialogue, the Slow Professor takes back the intellectual life of the university” (Berg & Seeber, 2016; p. xviii) and can change the conditions that foster negative well-being for faculty. Being a slow professor is ideal for some, but Berg and Seeber (2016) did not acknowledge how identity and how systems of oppressions shape and constrain who has the luxury to slow down in a system that valorizes the ideal worker.

In contrast, Rockquemore and Laszloffy (2008) foregrounded how Black faculty’s racialization shapes their pursuit of promotion of tenure. Accordingly, they provided strategic recommendations for Black faculty members about how to navigate their pathway to tenure without losing themselves in the process. They asserted that Black faculty can be strategic about how they use their time and energy rather than giving it all to their work, which is a form of resisting ideal worker norms. For example, they urged racially minoritized faculty to resist the tendency to overprepare for courses to reinvest their time into other areas of evaluation (e.g., research) and into their own rest and joy (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2008). Gonzales and Terosky (2020) observed related but distinct form of resistance in their study of women faculty members. Rather than framing work and home as in opposition, some women faculty members rejected dualism and integrated learning across the spheres of their lives. Furthermore, many women in Gonzales and Terosky’s study (2020) saw the value in collective work and shared success. Instead of solely measuring success through production, they attended to the quality of relationships and collective advancement.

Mid-Career Faculty and (Re)Negotiating Ideal Worker Norms. Expectations to be the ideal worker (Acker, 1990; Williams, 1989) do not dissipate after a faculty member earns tenure, nor do the constraints of systems of oppression. After earning promotion and tenure, mid-career faculty are often offered less protection from time-consuming service and administrative leadership work and in turn perform more of this labor while trying to fulfill ideal worker norms. For minoritized faculty, these expectations to engage in service work are further amplified (Turner, 2002; Zambrana, 2018). Perhaps this is why some research suggests mid-career faculty are the most dissatisfied in the academy (Jaschik, 2012).

Yet, earning promotion and tenure may provide mid-career faculty with a unique opportunity to resist and to renegotiate their relationships with ideal worker norms given their increased job security. For example, Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2016) found that academic mothers with tenure were “more likely to observe the [ideal worker] norms than feel bound by them as they did early career” (p. 15). Since they felt more agency, some participants who previously held major service or leadership roles were likely to take a step back from them with the idea that others would fill these roles. Decreasing service provided these women more opportunity to attend to family and to other career goals. Some participants in O’Meara’s (2015) study of tenured women expressed feeling similar agency, noting that they could make choices about the projects they would pursue and how they would use their time. While ideal worker norms and inequality regimes (Acker, 2006) remain present in the academy, mid-career faculty do have some agency as they move through the next phase of their career. Similarly, institutions have the opportunity and responsibility to move away from perpetuating ideal worker norms if they want to create sustainable faculty careers.

Recommendations for Faculty Members. Acknowledging that individuals have varied degrees of agency within institutions, mid-career faculty do have some opportunity to revisit their relationship to ideal worker norms and how they have affected them to date. Rather than assume one set of strategies will work for all, I offer some considerations that may help mid-career faculty identify how they want to move forward with their careers.

I encourage mid-career faculty to move away from striving for work-life balance to considering notions of work-life negotiation or work-life integration. The language of work-life balance sets up a false dichotomy (Gonzales & Terosky, 2020) where spheres of our lives are separate, and the goal is for time to be evenly split between our various responsibilities. Achieving perfect balance or harmony is extremely difficult in a system where the ideal worker is valued, and individuals are told they can and should do everything possible and at the highest level of excellence to advance in their careers. In effect, people are set-up to never have work-life balance and are made to feel as though they are failing when they give “too much” time and energy to one domain of their life. In contrast, the language of work-life negotiation acknowledges the push and pull of how we use our time and energy to manage relationships, expectations, and competing goals. Rather than viewing ourselves as failing, mid-career faculty can honor our multiple life roles and the dynamic nature of them. While this does not change the reality of ideal worker norms, this shift in framing can change our relationship with them.

I also recommend that mid-career faculty spend time intentionally reflecting upon and documenting their vision for the next phase of their careers. Some questions to guide thinking might include:

- What are your goals both personally and professionally?
- What do you want to do? What are things you don't want to do?
- How do you want to spend your time each day?
- How do you want to feel each day?
- What things are you not willing to give up or compromise?
- What pace and path do you want for your career? How would you feel if you had to speed up or slow down to reach your goals?

To be accountable, share your reflections with people you trust (e.g., family, mentors, close collaborators, dear friends) and who will be honest with you about your goals and progress to them.

For example, I have several versions of a “Committee of No” comprised of dear friends and

colleagues that I talk with before pursuing new opportunities. These are individuals who are invested in me, and I in them, so they are committed to holding me to my stated goals. Those who are invested in you, not the idea of you, can support you as you work through the tensions that come with negotiating ideal worker norms. My “Committee of No” members have helped me learn to set better boundaries, to accept that I cannot please everyone, and to invest in myself and the things that most matter to me.

As mid-career faculty (re)negotiate relationships with ideal worker norms, I also encourage people to consider how we contribute to cultures that valorize the ideal worker. For instance, mid-career faculty should revisit the messages they send both explicitly and implicitly about the productivity and its value to earlier career faculty and graduate students. Though many mid-career faculty are harmed by ideal worker norms, they are often complicit and hold high expectations for amount and quality of production when judging others’ opportunities for career advancement on promotion and tenure committees, award committees, and grant review panels. Mid-career faculty should consider how we use the privilege of tenure and the power it gives to us reduce the harm that ideal worker norms have on earlier career colleagues and students, particularly those who are minoritized. As more established leaders, mid-career faculty can change systems to the send messages that we value people and process over productivity. For example, post-tenure individuals can model setting firm boundaries with work and can support early career scholars in this process. Intentional efforts to set explicit hours of availability, limit response to emails in the evenings and on weekends, and decline opportunities can communicate that mid-career faculty members engage in work but do not solely live to work. Mid-career faculty can also actively work to revise and clarify criteria for promotion and tenure to create more expansive definitions of contribution that do not rely heavily on hyper-production. In doing so, mid-career faculty have the potential to rehumanize academic work and ourselves in the process.

Recommendations for Institutions. If institutions want to create more sustainable faculty careers, there is a need to revisit how ideal worker norms are leveraged and sustained in the academy. For example, institutions should reexamine policies and practices related to faculty evaluation both pre- and post-tenure. Often, faculty evaluation materials involve reporting counts of activities

including number of publications, amount of grants earned, number of students advised, and number of service activities without fully attending to the constraints of doing the work and the impact of it on the faculty member and others. While faculty generally write narratives to accompany these counts, the focus on reporting productivity often in acontextual ways reflects ideal worker norms. Institutions should consider revising faculty evaluation process to be more holistic, individualized, and identity conscious rather than using processes that treat faculty “the same” and reward those who can more closely enact ideal worker norms. Concurrently, they should clarify the standards for promotion to full professor and create multiple pathways for post-tenure advancement since ambiguous standards contribute to a culture of overworking and there are multiple ways to demonstrate excellence in the academy O’Meara et al. (2021).

At a local level, departments and colleges should reexamine how they allocate service and reward people for engaging in it. It is not uncommon to reward mid-career faculty who are seen as leaders or who are willing to serve with more labor without compensating them for their time or alleviating them of responsibilities in other areas. As previously noted, this practice has compounding negative effects on faculty who are women and are racially minoritized. To promote more sustainable faculty careers, departmental and college-level leaders should create more equitable ways to distribute serve responsibilities and provide rewards to those who engage in disproportionate amounts of service (O’Meara et al., 2021). They should also create clearer pathways for leave and sabbatical for mid-career faculty and honor the boundaries of those who are away from work. Furthermore, departmental and college-level leaders should model setting boundaries with work and resisting ideal worker norms. These leaders set the tone for how work is done, and they can be pivotal in shifting cultures to move away from rewarding overworking and penalizing those who cannot be the ideal worker. Shifting culture also requires commitment, collaboration, and support amongst leaders as they create policies and practices to honor work-life negotiation.

Conclusion

Although academia is a system that rewards individuals for their production and their enactment of ideal worker norms, the cost is high. Mid-career faculty are in a unique position to leverage their agency to renegotiate their relationship with ideal worker norms as they move through the next phase of their careers. While they are still beholden to ideal worker norms if they hope to advance to full professor, mid-career faculty may also become change agents who can help shift departments, colleges, and institutions to create spaces for more holistic and humanized ways for faculty to engage in their teaching, research, and service. Disrupting ideal worker norms will not only create more sustainable careers for mid-level faculty, but it will improve working and learning environment for all faculty and students. Collective resistance of ideal worker norms and shared commitment to better supporting each other is needed now more than ever if we are to create a professoriate that is diverse, inclusive, and committed to equity.

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