Article

Navigating an Academic Maze: Experiences of an International Female Scholar

Ileana Stigliani[1]

Abstract

Academia is a world filled with bright people searching for explanations for phenomena around us, and developing and testing new theories to explain the hows and whys of our experience. It is a world defined by a drive to expand the boundaries of knowledge, and is ostensibly characterized by intellectual enlightenment and relentless progress. But is academia truly progressive? Perhaps for some of us. For others, however, it is still a world where many people struggle to be seen, to be heard, and to succeed—especially if you are in the minority (e.g., you are female, international, a person of color, or have other features that put you in a minority category). In this essay, I share some of my personal experiences as an international female academic, with the hope that my challenges—and the ways I work to overcome them—will resonate with other people in the margins of our presumably progressive field.

Keywords

academic life, female academics

Editor's Introduction

Are you a guy? If so, you really need to read this essay. Ileana Stigliani's main target audience is ostensibly kindred spirits (other women and minority academics), who have experienced the kinds of difficulties she has experienced in the academic world, and who will surely give a knowing nod to Ileana's descriptions. But addressing that audience amounts to preaching to a well-informed choir. No, the more relevant audience for this little essay are the many testosterone carriers who are currently running much (most) of the world. Maybe it's time to turn the running of much of (at least) the academic world over to women. It might just improve things for all concerned. When asked when she thought there would be "enough" women on the Supreme Court, the notorious RBG (Ruth Bader Ginsberg) responded: "When there are nine, of course." Her implicit point was that historically, nine was the most common number of men on the Court. Why not give nine women a shot? A similar logic might just apply to academia. – Denny Gioia

There's a card on my office door that says: "Well-behaved women seldom make history". It was given to me a few years ago by a strong-willed and independent female MBA student with the message "Be you: go shine and make history. I will do the same!".

Looking from the outside-in, my life and academic career might seem successful and close to ideal, shining even. I earned my PhD from a renowned Italian business school; I spent some time at MIT in Boston while doing an ethnography of a prominent design firm; I landed a job at Imperial College Business School right after completing my PhD; I published my first article in a Top Management Journal when I was a post-doc researcher; I received tenure and even placed first in the 2018 "Best 40 under 40" list of MBA professors published by *Poets & Quants*. What could possibly be wrong with my life and professional career?

But all that glitters is not gold. Looking from the inside-out, my career to date has been far from ideal. Rather, it has been littered with (a few) ups and (lots of) downs—lots of learning experiences (as I prefer to think of my many failures now) and a handful of successes. No, I am not inviting you to my pity party hoping to get your sympathy. Nor am I going to wear my feminist hat and talk about glass ceilings, pay gaps, and gender discrimination—although I could easily do that, because we all know they exist, don't we? On the contrary, I would like to walk you through part of my personal journey as an international woman coming from a small town in southern Italy, trying to navigate herself in the international academic (mine)field. Why? Because I know that I am not an outlier or an exception. No, I have found instead

[1]Management and Entrepreneurship Department, Imperial College Business School

Corresponding Author:
Ileana Stigliani, Management and Entrepreneurship Department, Imperial College Business School, Exhibition Road, South Kensington, London, London SW7 2AZ, UK.
Email: i.stigliani@imperial.ac.uk

that I am close to the norm. For that reason, my story is many other women's story. The lessons I have learned will likely resonate with other (female) academics—and probably also with other minority people in academia. My story will enlighten and motivate those who have just entered the world of academia, I hope. And it will provoke and raise a few eyebrows among more seasoned scholars, of that I am sure.

Beware, though, as my tale is aimed not just at women (because what I have to say will not come as a great surprise to them), but also at men in academia who hold too much influence over too many women's and minorities' lives. Hopefully, they will be able to learn by hearing an old story told in a new light—a story that may just show why ostensibly enlightened academia might not be quite so enlightened as typically presumed.

Knowing Your Worth

Here's a frank, but probably (to many women at least) unsurprising, admission: I have impostor syndrome (Clance & Imes, 1978). I think I have had it since I was a child. My impostor syndrome has played out many times during my career: in my getting a plum job in the first place, at my first presentations at academic conferences, in (the lack of) salary negotiations when I deserved a raise, and when I published my first article in the *Academy of Management Journal*— which prompted me to think, "I bet people believe that was only a fluke!" Impostor syndrome is that nagging feeling that you are not good enough; that you do not belong; that you do not deserve that job, that promotion, that publication, and those high teaching scores. According to research (Roché, 2014), it tends to affect minority groups disproportionately. As a non-native, English-speaking, female academic doing qualitative research and teaching design thinking (a topic almost unknown to most until a few years ago), I think I qualify as a minority. Thus, for most of my career, I have felt like I needed to prove myself and my worth as a scholar to my colleagues and fellow academics. It took me years of hardship, anxiety, therapy, and a panic attack at the Academy of Management Meeting (only a few months *after* receiving tenure) to finally recognize that my core identity—who I am as a person and a scholar—is far more important than my number of publications.

It's funny: as academics, we seem to look at people differently before and after tenure or before and after publishing a "big hit." Too often we tend to look at ourselves and others and to think, "What have we published?" As if we were worthy of respect and admiration only based on our track record. It's funny and scary at the same time. And I fear for our doctoral students, the new generations of scholars, in a time when pressure to publish is higher than ever and mental health issues are on the rise.

What do I do to keep that nagging feeling of feeling like a fraud (McIntosh, 1985) at bay? I focus on my worth by reminding myself that I am good at what I do, by owning and celebrating my accomplishments (big or small), and, especially, by opening up to colleagues and mentors.

Identifying Your Role Models

I still remember the early days of my doctoral program at Bocconi University. I would eagerly read article after article about my favorite topics that would later become my research interests, that is, sense-making, identity, organizational artefacts, creativity, etc. Without even knowing it, I had already started identifying a handful of accomplished scholars I admired and aspired to emulate as my role models. Having role models is a career-shaping moment, because they influence our ways of thinking and acting, and motivate us to strive to uncover our true potentials and overcome our weaknesses. They help us build our academic identity—who we are as scholars. Fortunately for me, over time, my role models have become my mentors, my co-authors, and my dear friends. Seeking their advice and learning from their successes has been inspirational, to say the least. Yet getting to know about their failures and how they managed to overcome them has been truly transformational for me.

A few months ago, I was sitting across the table from one of my role models, drinking tea and eating cake. This is a person I truly admire and respect. Out of the blue, I asked, "How does it feel to be such a successful and accomplished scholar?" He almost fell off his chair and uttered:

Me? I am a late-bloomer! I did not graduate from a fancy school, and it took me a few years to start publishing my research in top management journals. Then at some point, I published a paper that everyone would cite and, all of a sudden, I became popular.

Another role model and mentor of mine shared with me that they almost failed their PhD comprehensive exams. Another one admitted their enduring struggles with anxiety and depression. And yet they persisted and followed their passions. Did I think less of them after they shared their struggles with me? Not at all! On the contrary, knowing that even the most accomplished scholars I know have hit some bumps in their careers made them more human, and, most importantly, made me realize that there is no setback that cannot be overcome. Persistence is key. This realization is now what keeps me going through my own hard times.

Finding Your Academic "Tribe"

Academia can be a lonely place. First as a graduate student and later as an untenured assistant professor, academic life is too often a lonely life. When the pressure to publish becomes overwhelming, we might spend hours sitting alone at our computers forcing ourselves to finally write that discussion section, procrastinating about it and feeling guilty over it. In those moments, we can feel very isolated in our uncomfortable

solitude. Does this scene sound familiar? When we have no one to compare ourselves to, and we have a big dose of impostor syndrome (like I do), it is easy to assume that others are writing more quickly or are being more successful than you are. As a female, qualitative scholar in a male-dominated, mostly quantitative environment, for a long time I felt like I had no place in academia, and that I was lagging behind my male quantitative colleagues. They published more quickly than I did, apparently more easily than I did, and had higher salaries than I did (and they still do). How can this possibly be true about pay in this day and age, and in this supposedly egalitarian industry?

What ultimately helped me? Simply put, I found my "tribe." And with that I don't mean my friends and family, but an academic circle I felt I belonged to, that I considered my network and safety net. There's a fundamental difference, I believe, between an academic tribe and an academic community, such as the OMT or MOC communities within the Academy of Management. To me, a tribe is a foundation of fellow scholars with whom you can discuss your work, share experiences, ask for advice and hang out at the Academy of Management meetings. These are the people that will help you find your first (and second) job, that will give you friendly reviews, write tenure and promotion letters for you, and become your co-authors, and when the time is right, there will be new junior people in your tribe whom you will support and motivate. Taking the time to find your tribe and cultivate your relationships within it are vital for a healthy productive academic career.

Enjoying the Process

A few months before going up for tenure, I received a journal rejection. My "ticket to tenure" had just slipped through my fingers after three rounds of revisions and over two years of work! I was devastated. I remember reading the editor's email that Wednesday evening, four years ago. I can still vividly feel the numbness in my body. Panic quickly spread through my mind at the realization that I had utterly and miserably failed in my career, that I would soon lose my job, and that I would be seen as "damaged goods" for the rest of my life. "Game's over", I thought. Thanks to my impostor syndrome, I immediately contemplated leaving academia and starting anew in a completely different field. I felt deeply ashamed and desperate, and I avoided going to the office for three weeks.

Eventually, a different paper came through, allowing me to save my job. Still, that painful experience is a constant and important reminder for me—a reminder that I should not only focus on the outcome, but primarily on the process, and on trying to enjoy the work I am doing.

When I decided to become an academic, I was moved by my intellectual curiosity and appetite for understanding organizational dynamics. In some grandiose way, I was motivated by the whole idea of advancing knowledge. I thrive when I do fieldwork, when I interview people and observe their behaviors, and when I write "thick stories" about them. That's my passion, my intellectual fuel, what makes me so excited that I struggle to fall asleep at night and what makes me jump out of bed in the morning. Publishing is a by-product of all of that. Nonetheless, we seem to live by the "publish or perish" mantra, but that mantra has turned us into zombies, constantly hungry for publications. At what point, I wonder, did we lose sight our primary purpose as a profession—advancing knowledge and influencing managerial practice—and start to put way too much pressure on a particular type of outcome (the overvalued publication in a top journal—most of which are seldom read by other scholars, let alone practitioners)? When did we lose sight of the fact that failing is often a necessary step in succeeding? Don't get me wrong! I understand that we need to make tenure to progress in our careers, but I also believe that it has made us too competitive, too territorial, too full of ourselves, and overall into lesser scholars than we might otherwise be. Why? Because we have become caught in an activity trap of our own making—focusing so intently on the activity (publishing) that we have lost sight of the larger goal that the activities are supposed to accomplish (making a difference in the world).

Standing Up for Yourself and for Your Ideas, But Picking Your Battles

There is an Italian saying that my dad used to repeat to me while I was growing up, "If you kick every stone you find on the street, you will go home barefoot." I have always been too stubborn and proud to follow his advice. Thus, thanks to my strong-minded nature, in my career (and life for that matter) I have fought lots of battles, big and small, important and not so much. I have fought for my research to be taken seriously and to be published, for design thinking to be included as a core part of my school's curriculum, for gender equality, and for fairness more generally. Over the years, I stood up for myself, for my students, and for my colleagues. I have won some battles and lost some others. I do not regret having fought them all, as they got me where I am now, and they also earned me the label of "difficult"—which I wear as a badge of honor. So, all-in-all the battles I have fought have served a purpose.

And yet, in hindsight, I wish I had followed my dad's advice a bit more. Had I chosen my battles more carefully, I would have spared myself lots of heartache and stress, thus avoiding feeling of being drained of emotional, mental, and physical energy much of the time. It took me two burnouts to realize I needed to spend my energy better and focus on what really matters for me, that is, my integrity as a scholar and a person.

So, how do I pick the battles that I really ought to fight now?

Ultimately, I ask myself this question: "If I don't fight this battle, regardless of whether I win it or lose it, will I be able to live with myself afterwards?" This is the killer question, because your conscience should play a key role in determining the battles you choose to fight. There is nothing laudable about running away from a fight that you know, in your heart, needs to be fought. Even if it upsets your boss. Even if it makes you unpopular with your peers. At the end of the day, you need to be able to look yourself in the mirror and believe that you made the decision that seemed genuinely right at the time. You will only achieve that by asking this very important question.

Practicing Self-care and Self-respect

I am a recovering perfectionist and a people-pleaser. That is a dangerous combination. It means that I would not accept any standard below perfection (which, of course, does not exist) and I would say "Yes" to any request that comes my way. Couple these with my feisty nature and you will understand my two burnouts.

What have I learnt from them? First, that there is a difference between striving for excellence and demanding perfection. Although there is nothing unhealthy about trying to do things better, perfectionism makes life an endless report card on accomplishment and performance-a fast road to unhappiness and mental health issues, which have seen a dangerously rising trend in academia. What makes perfectionism so dangerous is that while those in its grip desire success, they are mostly focused on avoiding failure, which too often leads to procrastination (how very ironic!).

It took me a lot of self-reflection and self-correction to relax my standards and to accept that it's OK to share a paper draft that is not perfect—that's why it is called a draft! Too often, though, I see doctoral students (including mine) stuck in this vicious circle of perfectionism and wonder whether the way we are training the future generations of management scholars is setting them up for failure? Furthermore, I am learning how to say no without feeling guilty. Too often women (especially) fall into this trap, and they accept all sorts of requests (the extra teaching, the extra service, that friendly review during the Christmas holidays, etc.) because saying no makes them feel guilty. But if they say yes, they are going to be frustrated with themselves. And they will likely feel resentful and angry with their requesters. Been there, done that. Way too often. So I now set my boundaries, and I expect people to respect them. It is called self-respect. And it works.

A Call to Action

Like probably every other woman in academia, I have too often felt incompetent and inadequate. I have been on the receiving end of inappropriate comments about my work, my appearance, and my personality. My efforts and accomplishments have been belittled; I have been bullied and discriminated against; I have fought a lot of battles, some successful, some not, but I still fight. I almost quit, but never did and now I never will.

Unfortunately, my story is virtually every other women's story. I have discovered that I am the norm, not the exception, which means that we are all in this together. So here is a message from a woman who is not "well-behaved" to all female academics and minority people who should also stop being quite so well behaved: Don't Quit! For the sake of diversity in research, teaching, and faculty composition, Stick With It! Even though we know sticking with it will come with tribulations, put up with them anyway. Higher education needs our talent, our determination, our intuition, our ways of seeing, and our creativity. Let's break the mold. Let's demand a seat at the table. And let's make an important statement by refusing to attend panels where the seats are mostly occupied by men. Let's insist on being on every significant committee so that we can offer a different perspective on important issues. Let's mentor female/minority students to change the system from the bottom up. Let's demand pay transparency because we know we are being underpaid. Let's make sure that we don't have more teaching, more administration, and more committee work than our male colleagues. Let's not be well behaved. Let's make some history.

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