

Fast Professors, Research Funding, and the Figured Worlds of Mid-Career Ontario Academics



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Abstract

Heightened pressures to publish prolifically and secure external funding stand in stark contrast to the slow scholarship movement. This article explores ways in which research funding expectations permeate the “figured worlds” of 16 mid-career academics in education, social work, sociology, and geography in seven universities in Ontario, Canada. Participants demonstrated a steady record of research accomplishment and a commitment to social justice in their work. The analysis identified three themes related to the competing pressures these academics described in their day-to-day lives: funding, challenges, and the fast professor. Participants spoke about their research funding achievements and struggles. In some cases, they explained how their positioning, including gender and race, might have affected their research production, compared to colleagues positioned differently. Their social justice research is funded, but some suspect at a lower level than colleagues studying conventional topics. Challenges might be located in the backstage (personal and home lives) or the frontstage (university or funding agency policies or embedded in the research itself). In aiming for the impossible standards of a continuously successful research record, these individuals worked “all the time.” Advocates claim that slow scholarship is not really about going slower but rather about maintaining quality and caring in one’s work; yet, participants’ accounts suggest they perceive few options other than to perform as “fast professors.” At mid-career, they question whether and how they can keep up this aspect of their figured worlds for 20 or more years.

Keywords: research funding, grants, slow scholarship, mid-career, time, academia

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The extensive national and international attention garnered by Berg and Seeber's (2016) *Slow Professor* reflects a growing social interest in adopting a considered and humane pace of academic life where quality supersedes quantity. Yet, as we shall show, this slow scholarship model contrasts sharply with the experience described by a selection of mid-career academics from Ontario (Canada) universities. Drawing on figured worlds theory (Holland et al., 1998), we explore the ways in which these academics understand and negotiate their local research cultures. They describe a hectic pace, driven by internal commitments and external expectations around research funding and productivity, yet hampered by many competing responsibilities. The figured worlds evident in their descriptions prompted us to label these individuals as "fast professors."

These fast professors emerge within the context of the "research imperative" (Gumport, 1991) that motivates universities to strategize about ways to rise within institutional hierarchies and rankings. For individual scholars, this imperative translates into a mantra of "publish or perish," and increasingly, "funding or famine" (Quake, 2009).

In an earlier study (Acker & Wagner, 2019), academics across several countries reported that describing their research as feminist could limit its funding potential. We wondered about the extent to which commitments to social justice research more broadly might be perceived to influence funding potential either positively or negatively in Canada, a country that is often considered socially progressive.

The purpose of this article is to explore the ways mid-career academics committed to social justice understand and respond to contemporary pressures around securing and carrying out externally funded research. The next three sections describe the theoretical framework of figured worlds, elaborate on the relevance of the slow scholarship movement to this work, and outline the rationale for focusing on mid-career academics.

Theoretical Framework

This article draws on the socio-cultural concept of a figured world, a theoretical framework developed by Dorothy Holland and colleagues (1998), who built on theories from Vygotsky, Bakhtin, and Bourdieu. For our purposes, we note that a figured world is a "socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 52). The authors are at pains not to privilege structures over agency or vice-versa, but to see their impact as reciprocal. "Worlds" are multiple, but some may be more prominent than others at a given moment in a given life. For example, rural students moving to South African universities need to learn new ways of working but in certain circumstances find their home-based knowledge is more pertinent than the university version

(Mgqwashu et al., 2020). As well, some Mexican American students and academics develop new self-identities as Chicana/o activist educators as they reinterpret their past experiences and increase their participation in activities that reinforce the new identity and the associated figured world (Urrieta, 2007).

The figured worlds theoretical framework has been used extensively in educational settings where teachers or students find their previous social worlds clashing with the one encountered in school or university. We extend the framework to consider how academics respond to the research funding imperative and to proposed alternatives such as slow scholarship. Academics committed to social justice might be particularly attuned to differences across figured worlds.

Culturally constituted worlds place limits on what is thinkable and also provide resources for actors when constructing identities within perceived constraints. In creating a sense of academic identity, individuals relate to the available subject positions within this figured world and note which positions are “dominant,” that is, desirable and powerful (Gonsalves et al., 2019). Although power and position are acknowledged in the theory, they do not prohibit meaning making by individuals in any position (Bennett et al., 2017). Discursive clashes are to be expected, such as when medical students are attempting to become standardized “good doctors” who are recognized as fitting the mold, while simultaneously reconciling this emerging identity with the emphases placed on the need for diversity within the profession (Bennett et al., 2017).

Academics’ figured worlds incorporate designations such as highly published, well-funded, and often-cited as indicators of dominant positioning. Through this article, we investigate one aspect of the academic figured world, the research funding imperative, its consequences, and its clashes with other figured worlds (slow scholarship, home, family, other work) in the lives of mid-career academics who prioritize social justice research. Our task here is to report what these academics say about the tensions they perceive around research performance and to speculate as to the fate of the slow scholarship movement within their figured worlds.

The Slow Scholarship Movement

Under various titles, such as slow academy, slow professor, slow scholarship, and slow science, the idea has spread that there may be ways to make academic workloads more manageable and careers more rewarding. The slow scholarship movement attempts to intervene in what is seen as a figured world gone too far into harmful productivity and performativity practices. In one sense, this movement might be considered an attempt to return to a nostalgic past, when academics could be thoughtful scholars and conscientious teachers rather than frantic publishers and distraught grant-chasers. The past, however, was imperfect in many ways, not least its institutionalized bias against women and racialized groups. Slow scholarship adherents

hope for something better: that they can improve the quality of scholarship and pedagogy, ease stressful conditions of academic work, and promote caring and collegiality. Slow scholarship is said to incorporate a feminist ethic of care, including care for oneself and one's colleagues (Mountz et al., 2015) and a "depth of engagement and a willingness to engage across differences of discipline and ideas" (Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2018, p. 983).

The desire for "slow" contrasts with the experience of what Vostal (2016) calls "accelerating academia." Given this accelerating pace, academics are rewarded for being fast rather than slow. As government funding has declined over time, universities have turned to entrepreneurial activities, donations, higher tuition, external research grants, and other mechanisms to cover expenses (Polster, 2007). Adopting elements of corporatization, institutions have placed an increased emphasis on audit, accountability, and performativity (Acker & Webber, 2017; Leathwood & Read, 2013; McGinn, 2012; Webber & Butovsky, 2019). These pressures percolate down to the actions and decision-making of individual academics whose figured worlds include stories of seeking external grants and thereby contributing to the status and survival of their universities and themselves (Polster, 2007; Shams, 2019). If the emphasis on securing competitive grants is high, while the success rate is low or variable, grant-seekers may suffer from uncertainty, anxiety, or ill health (Berg et al., 2016), which further shapes their figured worlds.

The Muddle of Middle Career

The experiences of early-career researchers have attracted considerable attention, raising questions about whether newer academics acclimatize to contemporary expectations more comfortably than senior colleagues who have known a different regime (Archer, 2008). Here we choose, less conventionally, to highlight mid-career academics. There is little consensus on what constitutes the middle of an academic career, apart from defining it as the stretch of time between consolidating a secure position (usually tenure in North America) and preparing for retirement. Even such a loose definition is suspect in an era when precarious contracts are increasingly more common than secure academic positions (Brownlee, 2015).

Despite definitional dilemmas, mid-career seems especially appropriate for an analysis of academic experience in current times. Mid-career academics are accumulating grants and publications and are often deeply engaged in reflection about what they have accomplished and where they are heading (Baldwin et al., 2008). Although the mid-career stage may be highly generative and productive (Neumann, 2009), it can also be a time of identity challenges, doubt, and malaise (Baldwin et al., 2008; Kandiko Howson et al., 2018; Wilson, 2012).

Our choice to examine the experiences of mid-career academics reflects an interest in the changing and unstable meaning of careers in academe (Breeze & Taylor, 2020). We reasoned

that academics in this group might be particularly likely to articulate anxieties over increasing pressures to bring in external funding and expectations to continue doing so over a long period of time.

Methods and Participants

The research reported here concerns the ways academics with social justice commitments describe planning, funding, leading, and carrying out their research projects. As noted above, we had reason to believe that in some countries, financial support might be harder to acquire for research that falls outside the mainstream. On the other hand, Canadian research agencies have taken strong stances in support of equity and diversity.¹ It is therefore possible that social justice commitments could be seen to be encouraged by Canadian funding bodies and institutions.

We were guided by two main research questions:

1. How do mid-career academics committed to social justice (topics, methods, theories, or modes of working) understand and respond to contemporary pressures around securing and carrying out externally funded research?
2. To what extent are the figured worlds of these academics compatible with the slow scholarship movement?

The analysis draws from two rounds of interviewing. A first set of interviews took place in 2016 with 17 education academics in five Ontario universities. We then extended the subject base in 2019–2020 by interviewing 24 additional academics from education, social work, geography, and sociology in seven Ontario universities. We chose these fields because they were familiar to us, compatible with our previous research, and expected to attract academics with social justice commitments. Ontario was a convenient site given our geographic locations; it also has the largest overall population, the highest university enrolment levels, the highest university attainment rates, and the largest share of federal research funding of all Canadian provinces. For both studies, we used university and funding body websites and professional and personal networks to identify potential participants with a steady record of external funding and an evident connection to social justice topics, such as feminism, anti-racism, migration, or youth welfare. We secured ethics clearance from our home universities and from participants' universities when required.

¹ As evidenced through the Tri-Agency Statement on Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (see https://www.nserc-crsng.gc.ca/NSERC-CRSNG/EDI-EDI/index_eng.asp) and the Dimensions program (see https://www.nserc-crsng.gc.ca/NSERC-CRSNG/EDI-EDI/Dimensions_Dimensions_eng.asp), as well as requirements for the Canada Research Chairs Program (see <https://www.chairs-chaire.gc.ca/programme/equity-equite/index-eng.aspx>), the New Frontiers in Research Fund (see <https://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/funding-financement/nfrf-fnfr/edi-eng.aspx>), and other initiatives.

This article narrows the focus to 16 mid-career academics (10 from the first set of interviews and six from the second set). We considered defining mid-career according to years after PhD (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2016) or after tenure (Baldwin et al., 2008). Complications such as prior time spent in other work or non-tenure track academic employment limited the viability of those designations in our chosen fields. Instead, we chose age as our differentiator, defining the mid-career subgroup as those academics between ages 40 and 53. Our logic was that about 10 to 15 years before and after would be necessary to complete the full career for this group, whether or not it was entirely spent in academe. In addition, there were age gaps of several years both below and above this range across the two sets of interviews.

These mid-career academics included three full professors, 11 associate professors, and two assistant professors (both of whom were tenured and promoted to associate professor shortly after the interviews); 11 who identified as women, four as men, and one as non-binary; five racialized or Indigenous academics and 11 who were White. These individuals were selected from seven Ontario universities, representing the full spectrum of institutional types according to the *Maclean's* magazine typology²: three medical-doctoral universities (11 participants), three comprehensive universities (four participants), and one primarily undergraduate university (one participant).

For the second set of interviews, we used purposive sampling to produce approximately equal numbers across fields. A potential limitation of the results reported here is that academics in education are over-represented (nine from the first set of interviews and three from the second). However, we reasoned that extending our purview to additional mid-career academics from the second set of interviews (two in social work, one in sociology, one in geography) would enrich the results and contribute broader insights about the effects of research funding expectations.

Qualitative, semi-structured interviews of approximately 90 minutes, conducted in person or online, were audiotaped and transcribed in full. Topics included research history and focus, research leadership and working with teams, supports or hindrances for research, balance between research and other responsibilities, and demographic details.

Following traditional methods of interpretive analysis, each author began with open and provisional coding that was informed by the initial interview topics, and then undertook subsequent cycles of coding to elucidate thematic connections within and across transcripts (Charmaz, 2010; Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Through group discussion and consensus building (Cascio et al., 2019), we identified a cluster of three themes related to the competing

² For details about the *Maclean's* magazine typology, see <https://www.macleans.ca/education/macleans-university-rankings-2021-our-methodology/>

pressures these academics described in their day-to-day lives: funding, challenges, and the fast professor.

Findings

Funding

We begin with a discussion of what the participants said about acquiring external grants: the symbolism of SSHRC grants; the turns and twists required to put together a proposal while unsure what strategy might ensure success; the sense that a dominant position within one's figured world can only be attained by extreme efforts over time; and the suspicion that social justice research is acceptable, but not prioritized.

The Symbolism of SSHRC

Over the past 20 to 30 years, obtaining external grant funding—the research funding imperative—has gradually moved from an optional extra to an institutionalized expectation, predominantly in research-intensive universities but spreading to others (Acker & Webber, 2016; McGinn, 2012; Polster, 2007). It is embedded in the figured worlds of academics as a goal, but not necessarily as a reality. Given our participants' home disciplines, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) is their usual target, although some turned to the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) for health-related projects. Those who work primarily with organizations or communities sought funding from foundations and other sources.

Although SSHRC offers multiple programs, Insight Grants (with funding up to \$400,000 spread over 2 to 5 years) are seen as a desirable achievement in most of our participants' figured worlds. Overall success rates across Ontario for this grant program have increased from 21% in 2013 to 48% in 2019, but considerable disciplinary variability exists (SSHRC, 2021). A SSHRC grant means funding, which in turn means the ability to hire assistants, buy equipment, attend conferences, and so forth (but not pay collaborators or fund teaching release). More than that, the symbolism of a grant is key. People who bring in SSHRC funding are seen as good researchers and good citizens. Susan commented, "The old [SSHRC] Standard Research Grants, and now the Insight Grants, they are at the centre, at the heart of everything that I do," while Amy noted that "I feel like having a SSHRC grant is some sort of symbol ... a marker." Figured worlds theory describes such markers as cultural tools that allow participants to internalize their sense of themselves as valued participants in the world (Bennett et al., 2017).

Working in Project Time

Although a grant-seeker might have some assistance from students and a university or faculty research office in preparing a grant proposal (Acker et al., 2019), in these non-medical, non-STEM fields, most of the preparatory work falls to the would-be principal investigator (PI).

Submitting an application requires tolerance for the extensive time and effort required, including finding a way through the various technical glitches, complex budget calculations, and physical discomforts of hours spent sitting and typing (Herbert et al., 2013; McGinn et al., 2019). The proposer needs to work in what Ylijoki (2015) calls “project time” (artificial deadlines, timelines, milestones) rather than a natural rhythm and flow. Project time is part of the figured world of grant-seekers and may fit uncomfortably with preferred workflows and priorities, as Crystal noted:

Most of the ways that I communicate with SSHRC is through text boxes. ... So there’s nothing that’s narrative about how I describe my work to them; it’s all answering, in a very functional way, the question. ... I’m making what I do seem more pared down than it really is and less thoughtful, far less thoughtful.

Applying does not guarantee success. Most had experienced an unsuccessful application; some quite a few. Participants had difficulty comprehending why some applications achieved funding and others did not. Resubmissions a year later with only minor changes might shift the result from a low to a high rating, leaving the recipient relieved but perplexed. Participants described the process as a “crap shoot” (Nicole) and when asked why a particular application had been unsuccessful, might respond “I don’t know” (Jess). The inexplicability of positive or negative funding decisions represented a discursive clash that could undermine their identification with the figured world.

When Is Enough Enough?

Holland et al.’s (1998, p. 52) description of figured worlds involves particular actors being recognized (successful applicants), significance assigned to certain acts (getting a grant), and particular outcomes valued (becoming a PI). The academic figured world contains a particular reward structure. Given this reward structure, the question arises about the extent to which acquiring a grant makes the recipient powerful within that figured world (Gonsalves et al., 2019). The participants’ responses make it clear that, yes, a level of power or at least recognition comes with grant success, but only to a certain point, for in theory, one could always capture another grant or a larger one. Even with multiple grants, academics felt they had not done enough.

Consistent with figured worlds theory (Holland et al., 1998, p. 41), participants positioned themselves through comparisons with their colleagues. Despite an impressive scholarly record, Michelle commented, “if I look at my colleagues, my numbers in terms of publications and grants look pretty small.” Similarly, Amy stated, “I work really hard ... but I don’t feel that I work nearly as hard as a lot of my colleagues who have those big projects, big international connections, lots of status, big grants.” Such comparisons leave them little room for going slower or doing less.

The Impact of Research Topic and Social Justice

Similar to Michelle and Amy, Emily compared her accomplishments to those of others in her department. She described a colleague as an “application machine.” As she explained, “He’s got SSHRC. He’s got tons of other granting agencies that are interested in his ... topic. He’s got industry grants. He’s got foundation grants.” She continued:

When I look at where he applies and how much he applies, part of the reason he can do that is because capital, the state, and the public are all united [in believing] this [his topic] is an important problem that needs to be solved.

In contrast, Emily is “looking at a problem people don’t want to solve.” Her social justice focus is one that might disturb people in power. She does have funding, but “the funding landscape is just really fundamentally structurally different for him and me. And that has material impacts on our careers.” Michelle made a similar point: “I talk about justice and power and maybe that’s why I don’t get million-dollar grants.”

Although Michelle, Michael, Susan, and others spoke about the “packaging” or “strategy” required to secure grant success for a social justice topic, it appeared that the higher levels of money, fame, and success were reserved for topics that align with the status quo. Perhaps this outcome is a Canadian compromise: diversity and equity are respected but not funded generously.

Challenges

If acquiring a grant were the only objective for our participants, they might be able to construct a “slower,” more manageable life around it. But their statements suggested that the grants (and the work involved in carrying out the research) hovered on top of everything else, both at home and at work. Despite strong publishing and grant success, participants narrated many challenges that affected their ability to perform consistently as dominant players in the figured world. We distinguish between backstage issues regarding their personal and home lives, and frontstage issues prevalent in their academic activities.

The Backstage

The identities of individuals came to the fore in their discussions: parents of young children set certain parameters; others coped with a panoply of personal problems; gender, race, and disability factored into the ways that participants positioned themselves. We might consider these issues to be in the backstage, not always evident to colleagues and managers.

Even before COVID-19, parents of young children were under particular stress (Willey, 2020). Given the age span of the group, only five participants (three women and two men) had children aged under 12 at the time of interview; three other women had young teenagers. Crystal

observed a clear boundary between work and family: “My children are young, and they really fill my attention when I’m with them and so, when I am not working, I am not working.”

There were implications for mothers in particular, which frequently spilled over into relationships with co-parents, as Emily spelled out:

If I were single, I would bring my kids with me on field research, but I can’t do that because I’m married and my partner doesn’t want that to happen, and so I think there are gendered pieces here around work–life balance ... around what kinds of research can you do.

Caring responsibilities were found in the men’s stories too. It is hard to imagine forging forward with grant acquisition and other such achievements in the midst of life–changing circumstances:

My dad died and then we put my mom in a nursing home, and I ended a relationship, and then my mom died and also during that time I was [administrative responsibility] and that also coincided with a very upsetting event [in the Faculty]. (Christopher)

My father got cancer and I was caring for him on my own, we had another kid ... and so I really just couldn’t move forward with the SSHRC. (Kevin)

Participants’ own illnesses or disabilities also surfaced (cf. Mountz, 2016). Living with chronic fatigue, Jess said, “I vary between describing myself as being disabled and just chronically ill.” Nicole spoke about the consequences of suffering a concussion: “I was pretty good at delegating and also pretty good at keeping things, multiple balls up in the air, and since my concussion ... the thoughts are never at my fingertips.

Another life dimension that affected the participants was their race or ethnicity, which was a prominent consideration for this group of academics engaged in social justice work. Some White participants explicitly noted the privilege they held, whereas many racialized and Indigenous participants described responsibilities to their communities that shaped the topics they studied and sometimes their funding sources and reporting practices (Wagner & Acker, in press).

Overall, what we see here is the backstage element of academic life. Figured worlds overlap and clash. Work–life conflicts are ever present. Currently, the COVID–19 pandemic has made research interruptions far more evident than before (Oleschuk, 2020), yet our interviews, carried out before the pandemic, indicate that these interruptions were already there, if obscured. As Michelle summarized:

I know that more people than not may have a major caregiving issue in their family, aging parents, children, people with disabilities, long–term illnesses. Where do we talk about

this, because that is going to affect what you're able to do? We don't talk about it. We don't have policies to address it.

There are always backstage elements to an academic life, and they shape academics' perceived placement within the figured world.

The Frontstage

It is not simply personal life that interferes with research progress and productivity. Other challenges were located more clearly in the institution and the research projects themselves. These frontstage elements were often more visible to colleagues and supervisors than home life.

Service and administrative responsibilities create a kind of "work-work conflict" when set against research expectations. Brenda had recently been appointed to an administrative role. When asked about the distribution of her work time, she hesitated before replying:

[It's] 90% administration, maybe 10% research and keeping up. ... In reality, we're doing a lot more of that work outside of the office, at my home ... not during working hours. ... So I'm working beyond capacity, trying to fulfill my research commitments any way I can, because I came out of a position that had a lot of research projects on the go.

Racialized academics, especially women, often have a hidden university workload, sometimes called cultural or identity taxation (Hirshfield & Joseph, 2012; Mohamed & Beagan, 2019). One participant³ referred to "get[ting] pulled onto every committee they have about diversity, hav[ing] every student coming to them that feels like they don't belong in this space." In the end, this person, "who cares deeply about these issues, says okay, sure, I'll do it." Similar to this individual, other participants' social justice leanings entailed heavy service workloads to fulfill community commitments. The accumulation of extra work does not bode well for adopting a slow scholarship practice.

There were numerous stories of difficulties encountered in actually pursuing the research. Some participants faced complications in acquiring permissions from research ethics boards. Some had difficulties keeping a team together as students moved on and colleagues were diverted by competing commitments. Many PIs believed they carried too much unrelieved responsibility and found their grants insufficient to pay a project manager or full-time researcher. Kevin commented, "I felt like I'm a data manager and personnel manager more than a researcher."

³ As part of our promise of confidentiality, we have avoided specifying race or ethnicity or adding a pseudonym to quotations that might lead to identifying a participant. We also deliberately selected fairly bland, "English" names as pseudonyms to minimize any associations with particular cultural groups.

Richard described how an “overly complex” project was added to “every other aspect: supervising, teaching, administrative work.” Participants noted that SSHRC Insight Grants did not allow teaching buyouts that would give them increased research time. The figured worlds of academics have changed over time to incorporate real or perceived workload increases (Kyvik, 2013). Juggling research, teaching, and service commitments means that, as Heather reported, “The demands of this job [are] just immense.”

Of course, there have always been challenges, and academics are not the only ones to encounter them. Our argument is more specific than that: the added expectations that accompany the research imperative (Gumport, 1991) have increased still further as universities have come under pressure to generate more financial resources, and the corporatization of these institutions has led to monitoring of academic accomplishments, including grant acquisition, in overt ways. Universities pay attention to their standing in ratings, while a host of new metrics have intensified comparisons among individuals and units. Constant technological improvements have required digital agility to perform as capable academics. All of these forces prey strongly on academics. The pressure to keep up the pace creates what we call “the fast professor.”

The Fast Professor

The fast professor is an ideal type or composite, intended to showcase the contrast between the image of the slow professor advanced by Berg and Seeber (2016) and the image presented by these mid-career academics. Participants stressed the boundarylessness of their work. Michael noted that academia “invites workaholism”:

So, if you are already predisposed to allow work to take over your life for whatever reason, it does, because it has no mechanism for telling you “stop.” None at all. It just takes and takes and takes and takes.

After explaining how she tries to get to the gym early in the morning, Heather described her academic work: “I work 7 days a week ... [pause] but maybe I want it that way too, I don’t know. It’s all encompassing. I have a hard time not working.” Ylijoki (2021) writes about timeless time, the greatest luxury for academics. It is possible that Heather, and others, can experience the pleasure of timeless time. Jacqueline stated, “I’m probably obsessed with working. I’m not good at relaxing, but I think that is a normal thing for all academics. My schedule is flexible, which means I could work all the time” [laughs].

Working all the time is deeply embedded in the figured world of a fast professor. It is how these academics cope with research funding expectations. There is even a certain enjoyment in immersion in work, as Heather and Jacqueline hint. Nevertheless, for mid-career academics, the

prospect of working many more years at this pace gives them pause. Despite her predilection toward working all the time, Jacqueline saw an end to this practice for herself:

The last thing that I wanted to tell you, and this will probably be a surprise to you, is that every year when my pension statement comes out, I try and figure out when I can retire. ... I find academia really exhausting.

Other participants were rethinking what they wanted from academic life (Baldwin et al., 2008). After reading *The Slow Professor* (Berg & Seeber, 2016), Jess was trying to work out ways to ease the stress of working life and considering starting a reading group to discuss enacting the philosophy with colleagues, signalling an alignment with the “collaborative, collective, communal action” advocated by Mountz et al. (2015).

Many participants expressed some ambivalence about their futures. Wendy was uncertain about applying for full professorship:

Sometimes I think I want it and then other times I don't really care. It doesn't have that same kind of meaning. I don't know. I could do it, but I don't know. I don't know. I don't know what I'm going to do.

Richard, recently promoted to full professor, was reassessing the future: “My partner and I have discussed this [work–life balance] a lot in the last 5 years or so ... and we both feel we're a little unbalanced.” Similarly, Denise commented, “I feel like I've done lots of the things that I wanted to do and now what am I going to do?” Self-authoring (Bennett et al., 2017) or adopting personas as fast professors had led them to this point in their careers, and they were uncertain about the possibilities to be any other way.

Discussion

Our analysis highlights the ways that 16 mid-career academics with social justice commitments understand and respond to the pressures to secure external research grants and manage projects (Research Question 1). This work reveals the less acknowledged aspects of the social production of research. Participants gave reasons why their achievements might have slowed, through caring responsibilities or rejected grant applications or work–work conflicts. In some cases, they explained how their positioning, including gender and race, within the academic landscape might affect their research production, compared to colleagues positioned differently. Despite their admirable accomplishments half-way through their careers, they were uncertain about plans for the future, some wondering if they could or should find a way to slow down and reduce stress (Research Question 2).

Significance

At one level, our study enabled academics to describe and bemoan the pressures in their lives, but it is more than that. Our central focus was on what we called the research funding

imperative. Even in an environment of limited funding sources, unpredictable success rates, demanding application practices, and sporadic institutional supports, securing a grant has taken on a symbolic meaning in the figured world of being a good academic citizen and respected scholar. Within this figured world, the focus seems to have shifted to the grant itself as the key accomplishment rather than the potential contribution to knowledge that the funding might enable.

Discussing the vicissitudes of grant acquisition with these largely successful researchers brings out the irrationality of much of the process. The countless hours, often in the middle of the night to avoid peak server times, devoted to recrafting their scholarly records to fit the byzantine requirements of the Canadian Common CV for grant applications is but one example (Woodgett, 2016). We use “fast” as a somewhat ironic label that encompasses working quickly to deadlines, doing a lot of work, working all the time and in varied sites, despite backstage and frontstage impediments and irrationalities. Technological innovation allows working faster and without assistance from support staff but if anything, it increases the amount of work to be done in the same amount of time. When an additional expectation such as acquiring grants through competitive applications and acting as PI for multiple projects is added, nothing is taken away. The typical figured world is now so congested that there is barely any time to think about reform.

Although many of our findings would apply across the career, we chose to focus on academics in mid-career, where the literature suggested to us that conflicts between fast and slow might be expected to surface most dramatically. In the past, the career curve of academic accomplishments rose more gently; in the current environment, academics are expected to demonstrate publication and grant attainment from the very start of their appointments, if not earlier (Pitt & Mewburn, 2016). At mid-career, in the decade of their 40s and early 50s, participants wondered what would come next: would it simply be more years of the same frantic activity?

Research Question 2 asked whether participants’ perceptions could be compatible with the ideals of the slow scholarship movement. On the whole, there is little evidence that participants are doing more than occasionally dreaming of going slow. In the competing discourses (Bennett et al., 2017) of the research imperative and slow scholarship, the former was clearly winning out over the latter. Why might that be the case? As tenured academics (or on the cusp of tenure), these scholars need not fear losing their jobs. At some institutions, merit-based assessment might add to salaries, although income did not seem to be a strong incentive for any of the participants. A promotion to full professor might stimulate more intense activity for a time. Enjoyment of the work and comparisons to colleagues are contributors.

There are other less obvious motivators. Individuals strive to conform to external surveillance, embedded in tenure, promotion, and annual reviews, but even more so, they practise internal or self-surveillance (Foucault, 1977). Our findings suggest that academics do not need a government-directed research assessment exercise to compel them to work all the time. The research funding expectation is an embedded aspect of their figured worlds and need not be enforced by prescription.

Limitations

This project has the limitations of being relatively small, while over-representing education scholars and foregrounding academics with social justice commitments. Selection procedures deliberately included academics with clear records of grant success and thus provide no information about the ways that academics without comparable records cope with research funding expectations. Higher education is provincially governed in Canada, and all participants were based in Ontario; hence the findings may not generalize across the country, although we suspect that similarities would outweigh differences.

Conclusion

The research funding imperative has been shown to be a firmly fixed aspect of academics' figured worlds and one of the barriers to implementing slow scholarship. Despite the popularity of the *Slow Professor* (Berg & Seeber, 2016), there are few signs that these worlds have been altered. If anything, it is the COVID-19 response that may be changing academic work. Although working from home may have slowed down research publications and progress, in many cases it simply added more backstage "things to do" to a busy academic life as children were kept at home for many months and expected to maintain some kind of learning timetable (Crook, 2020).

The figured world is entwined with the reward system. Even in the relatively benign academic culture of Canada, fast is still rewarded and slow is not. Many institutions have annual performance reviews, sometimes with salary implications, and tenure and promotion reviews remain daunting (McGinn, 2012). Funding deadlines, nomination deadlines, journal deadlines for submissions and revisions, and so forth create a relentless time clock.

The research eco-system is structurally hostile to slow-based reform. Underfunding universities, and the social sciences and humanities in particular (Advisory Panel, 2017), sustains a belief that academics need to bring in a grant to be good institutional citizens. The pressures to secure external research funding for the institution's sake can be expected to increase under the performance-based funding models that are now starting to take shape across the country, including in Ontario (Spooner, 2019). Individuals are enmeshed in figured

worlds that require competitive successes and infinite investments of time. One cannot rest on one's laurels as laurels do not last for long.

This is not to say that "slowing down" would be completely impossible in a given setting where determined efforts are made. At its best, it could mean becoming more reflective, more thoughtful, and more genuinely collaborative (Mountz et al., 2015). Currently, researchers are named and rewarded as if their accomplishments are down to a single individual, when there are almost always many others involved. If the irrationalities were weeded out of the system, performance indicators rethought, excessive individualism curbed, and caring prioritized, we might be closer to the ideals underpinning slow scholarship. Further research could identify case sites, departments, disciplines, or institutions where some form of intentional slow scholarship has taken hold and interrogate the ways in which it might operate successfully. The encouragement to work differently needs to go beyond individualistic self-help into more structural innovations (as, indeed, Berg & Seeber, 2016, argue). It will be interesting to see if the different ways of working compelled by the COVID-19 pandemic contribute to a new normal.

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