Women academics crafting slow and sustainable careers: lessons from a pandemic

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Abstract

Purpose

The Covid-19 pandemic was a time when most women, including academics, faced increased challenges. Some women academics, however, told us that they had positive experiences during lockdown. This paper explores how identity work and job crafting strategies were adopted by these women to enable them to flourish and build more sustainable careers.

Methodology

This paper draws on data from semi-structured interviews with twenty-three women academics in the United Kingdom. A deductive content analysis was undertaken.

Findings

These women engaged in both identity work and job crafting, transforming their self-meanings and working lives, in line with the principles in of slow academia. This was enabled by changes in the spaces and temporalities of work afforded by the pandemic, which provided a conducive context for these women to use individual agency and achieve positive outcomes. We critically discuss the positionalities and privilege which made this possible.

Originality

This paper provides empirical evidence of how adopting principles of slow academia led to positive experiences for some women academics during the Covid-19 pandemic. It also makes a theoretical contribution by integrating the concepts of identity work and job crafting to explore how these women achieved a sense of flourishing. While identity researchers have utilized these separately, we theorize how these two frameworks converge, including within the specific research setting, and explore lessons that might be learned from this pandemic experience to improve gender parity and career sustainability in Higher Education.

Key Words

Women Academics; Covid-19; Identity Work; Job Crafting; Slow Academia

Introduction

Despite long-held public perceptions of academics having a wealth of unrushed time for contemplation and writing (Pocklington and Tupper, 2002), toxic masculinity (Pruit *et al*., 2021) and neoliberalist agendas (Mairusia and Cole, 2017) at play in the contemporary higher education context have led to an intensification of work and high stress levels for academics (Ross *et al*., 2023). Higher education nowadays can be characterized as 'fast academia' (Martell, 2014) with slower approaches seemingly elusive. Academic careers can be especially challenging for women (Doyle and Hind, 1998), who often have a double-bind of domestic and care responsibilities alongside their professional roles (Hochschild and Machung, 1989). The amorphous, boundaryless (Arthur and Rousseau, 2021) role of an academic unequally impacts women's well-being and career progression prospects (Cooper, 2019), which may be due in part to an uneven division of tasks (Sümer and Eslen-Ziya, 2023), difficulties in saying 'no' (Clark, 2023), and challenges in establishing and maintaining boundaries between work and non-work time (Westoby *et al*., 2021).

When the Covid-19 pandemic led to lockdowns in 2020 and 2021 and academics were thrust into unexpected home-based working, many women scholars did not fare well (Gabster *et al*., 2020; Deryugina *et al*., 2021; García-Louis and Reyes-Barriéntez, 2022). Home-schooling, emotional support, and the marshalling of space and resources within the home, became added daily struggles for many (Anderson and Kelliher, 2020). Yet, through our friendship and colleague groups we also began to hear of some women academics doing well - even flourishing - in what seemed to be adverse conditions.

We found resonance with Otto *et al.*'s (2010, p.2) definition of flourishing as "a syndrome of positive feelings and positive functioning in life, characterized by goodness, generativity, growth, and resilience" and used this wording to recruit women who considered themselves

as having flourished during the pandemic by publishing this definition in a call for interviewees.

We chose to examine the positive impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic after finding an overwhelming focus on the negatives, and felt it would be novel and important to report data evidencing how some women bucked this trend. As Heffernan (2015) states, exploring the counter-intuitive is crucial for learning and transformation.

Our interpretation of the data, collected from 23 participants, suggests that new ways of managing time and relationships, as well as mindfully seeking pleasure and deep understanding, were key factors in these women's experiences of lockdown. These elements chime with ideas about 'slow academia' presented by Berg and Seeber (2016) in their book 'The Slow Professor'. We reveal more about this framework and how it relates to the data collected as we open our results section later in this paper.

As well as this empirical contribution, this article makes a theoretical contribution by integrating the frameworks of identity work (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Caza *et al*., 2018) and job crafting (Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001). Identity work refers to the interpretive, ongoing process through which individuals construct, maintain, and revise their sense of self (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). Caza *et al*. (2018) propose that identity work is an ongoing process which can be accelerated, and brought to the fore, by significant or traumatic events such as a change in work environments. This makes it a helpful lens to consider responses to the enforced working from home (WFH) context of lockdown. Job crafting (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) offers a valuable framework for exploring gender inequalities in professional contexts by drawing attention to how individuals may or may not have agency to shape their work experiences. Both identity work and job crafting have been recognized for their emancipatory potential (Alvesson and Wilmott, 2002; Wrzesniewski *et*

al., 2013), which appeals to our feminist principles and our hopes to learn lessons from an otherwise tragic event.

Wrzesniewski *et al*. (2013) state that "we have little theory to explain the mechanisms through which job crafting is likely to cultivate a more positive sense of meaning and identity for employees" and surprisingly few identity scholars have looked to job crafting's interactions with processes of identity. As we seek to address this gap our guiding research question is: *How did some women academics flourish during the Covid-19 pandemic when others did not?* We proceed to discuss identity work and job crafting further, before expanding upon why we felt it promising to combine the two into a framework for research in the chosen context.

Identity and Identity work

The Covid-19 pandemic was a significant global event in recent human history and a period when the world reflected on existential dilemmas. Even before the pandemic, Tietze and Musson (2003, p. 330) told us that "working at home brings to the forefront important questions about the formation of human characters and identities". This led us to identity as a useful lens through which to explore the experiences of women academics WFH during the pandemic.

Our view of identity parallels Giddens' (1991, p. 244) who explains it as "the self as reflexively understood by the individual". He concludes, "the self is not a passive entity, determined by external influences; in forging their self-identities, no matter how local their specific contexts of action, individuals contribute to and directly promote social influences that are global in their consequences and implications" (ibid, p2). This leads to us understand identity as a dynamic construction and people as only agentic to some extent. In other words, identity is something to be worked at, "a process of constant reconstruction" (Fachin and

Davel, 2015, p. 371) but the building blocks for the project of self (Grey, 1994) are limited only to those which are culturally available.

Whilst Alvesson and Wilmott (2002, p. 622) famously consider an employee's sense of self "a significant medium and outcome of organizational control" they also propose it as a possible space for "forms of micro-emancipation" (ibid, p. 624). Therefore, through studying identity we might observe instances of rebellion, subversion and of social change, which no matter how small, can signal loosening of control and indicate transformation.

Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003, p. 1165) provide a classic definition of identity work, as the ways human beings are "engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness". Caza *et al*. (2018, p. 895) later conducted a meta-analysis of articles using the term 'identity work' and proposed a revised definition: "Identity work in occupations and organizations consists of the cognitive, discursive, physical, and behavioral activities that individuals undertake with the goal of forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, revising, or rejecting collective, role, and personal self-meanings within the boundaries of their social contexts".

Women and Identity Work

Highly relevant for our current project is Brown's (2014) contention that identity work is gendered, and more complex for women, who are more likely than men to work on selves that are relational, have less fixed interpersonal boundaries, and are more context specific. Feminist works have revealed the struggles inherent in gendered identity work in the context of academia (Lund, 2012) and intersectional feminism shows how identity performances are bound within a hierarchy of power and privilege. Intersectionality means that there are different positionalities of women in academia which will affect the likelihood of flourishing. Ashcraft (2018), for example, reports on the difficulties of academics who are mothers to

reconcile roles, while Gao and Sai (2020) provide personal reflections of how the Covid-19 pandemic affected the working lives and wellbeing of single female academics who live alone. Blell *et al.* (2023) reveal the challenges for women of color working in higher education, during the pandemic and beyond, while Carreri *et al.* (2024) consider the social class and life-course stage of women academics.

Job Crafting and its intersections with Identity Work

Wrzesniewski and Dutton first discussed job crafting in 2001, defining it as "the physical and cognitive changes individuals make in the task or relational boundaries of their work" (p. 179). Scholars have since developed the concept to move beyond the crafting of tasks and relationships, incorporating different dimensions. Zhang and Parker (2018, p.126) highlight the process of job crafting. They propose that both behavioral and cognitive job crafting can be resource-focused or demand-focused, in other words, it concerns the nexus of what is externally available and personally motivating for workers.

We find much of the literature around job crafting inherently managerialist and conservative, striving to establish how affording some flexibility can ultimately increase the productivity of workers and their 'fit' and commitment within organizations. There is also an absence of empirical and theoretical exploration around the connection between identity work and job crafting (a claim made by Wrzesniewski *et al*. in 2013, and not since addressed). In this paper we propose that the crafting of selves and jobs go hand in hand for workers, as both are processes through which individuals shape their experiences and sense of self in the workplace. We suggest that they overlap in the following ways:

1. Both entail meaning-making and can produce a sense of meaningfulness for individuals in work;
2. Each has a set of goals/outcomes that are tied up with transformation;

3. Both might be undertaken through various modes: cognitive (pertaining to thought and understanding); discursive (speech); physical (management of tangible resources); and behavioral (action);

4. Both are self-initiated and 'bottom up' processes dependent on agentic individual workers;

5. Both are shaped by social contexts, for example the expectations, relationships and resources available within national and organizational cultures.

This list, and the definitions of these concepts outlined above, led us to construct a theoretical foundation for our study, represented in figure 1. We will now discuss the specific research setting.

[Figure 1 here]

Research Context

Contemporary Higher Education

Neoliberalism is a key and pervasive feature of contemporary higher education, particularly in Anglo-Saxon countries like the US, UK, and Australia. Its influence has led to significant shifts in how universities operate, how education is valued, and the roles of both academics and students.

Universities originally existed to solve global challenges (Universities UK, 2023) as their members develop new understandings of problems facing the world. The development of ideas takes time and collaboration (Paulus and Brown, 2007; Chen, 2012), yet we propose that these are in short supply within higher education employment today, where neoliberal agendas favor speed and competition.

Gilbert (2021, p. 444) describes neoliberalism as "a dominant ideological and discursive project that promotes deregulation, the privatization of the public sector, the eradication of unions and the welfare state, and the extension of market principles into all areas of life". In a context of neoliberalism students are positioned as consumers, as market-driven criteria are mobilized (Marsh-Davies and Burnett, 2023) and efficiency becomes the primary goal (Nóvoa and Alvim, 2020).

Alemán (2014, p. 108) speaks of universities as historically gendered domains "in which women have subordinate status" to men and claims that the neoliberal 'managerialist' ideology of many higher education institutions represents a 'new masculinity' and one that poses a serious threat to gender equality. This is the sectoral context for the study.

The Context of Working from Home during a Pandemic

The historical setting of our study is the period when academics were WFH during lockdowns necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Most literature about WFH draws on research conducted before the pandemic (for a helpful overview see Kelliher and de Menezes, 2019) and assumes that choices around WFH are, more often than not, voluntary and mutually agreed between the employee and organization.

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, WFH was becoming increasingly popular as new technologies enabled many roles to be performed at a distance. Organizations saw benefits in terms of reduced estate costs (Barreo *et al*., 2023), increased organizational commitment (Harker *et al*., 2012), and enhanced productivity (Allen *et al*., 2015). Many employees enjoy the flexibility of increased autonomy over their working tasks, space, and often time (Saragih *et al*., 2021), find it improves work-life balance, and reduces commuting time and associated stress (Allen *et al*., 2015). Remote workers, pre-pandemic, reported higher levels of job satisfaction and overall well-being (Golden *et al*., 2017). Research has shown that WFH can potentially support women's careers by reducing some of the pressures associated with

traditional office-based work, enabling women to manage their time more effectively (Islam, 2021).

Remote working also has numerous reported downsides, with 'isolation' being prominent in pre-Covid arguments (e.g. Lal and Dwivedi, 2009) and 'spillover' of work into the home/family domain topping the chart during Covid (O'Donohoe, 2020). In short, there remains a mixed picture, which suggests that WFH is not necessarily a panacea either for worker satisfaction or gender equality.

Academics have always had more ability than many in the wider workforce to choose when and where to work (Berg and Seeber, 2016), yet, just as WFH isn't the ideal mode for everyone in the wider labor market, it doesn't suit all academics. As Rutigliano (2021) points out, assumptions are often made that the academic role is exclusively inhabited by heterosexual male professors who have autonomy around their work and are protected from spillover effects by barriers enabled by a supportive wife. This means that the specific WFH challenges of women academics are often overlooked.

In the United Kingdom, which is the national setting for this study, 16th March 2020 was the date when leaders requested a cessation of non-essential travel and contact, effectively initiating WFH for all academics and requiring teaching to be delivered at a distance. Lockdown was legally enforced from 26th March until it was conditionally lifted on 10th May, at which point arrangements were made on a more local level, determined by infection rates. A second national lockdown came into force in November 2020, with some easing over Christmas but a third lockdown was announced from 6th January 2021. Whilst schools reopened in June 2021, many Universities in the UK continued with remote or hybrid delivery through the 2021-2022 academic year.

Critical writings from the context of the Covid-19 pandemic reveal the diversity of women academic's experiences, for example, the reflections presented in Abdelattif and Gatto

(2020). In their paper Abdelattif reflects on her experience as a single-parent: "…managing my impressions and facework when I interact with my children, my primary audience, at home. I try my best to be positive, even when I'm devastated". Tekeste *et al*. (2025) explore how an online writing group enabled a diverse group of early career academics "to transcend the constraints of the expected academic professional identity" during lockdown. These writings inspire us to wish to understand how some women academics managed to flourish during the pandemic, counter to our assumptions for them within a masculinist neoliberal higher education landscape.

Materials and Methods

We drew on our professional networks and utilized social media (Twitter - now 'X', LinkedIn, and Facebook) to recruit women academics who worked from home in the UK context during the lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 and who identified themselves as having flourished during the Covid-19 pandemic. We published the definition of flourishing by Otto *et al.* (2010) (see Introduction) in our call for participants to ensure a suitable sample.

One to one, semi-structured in-depth interviews were selected for data gathering as they allow for the collection of rich responses to open-ended questions (Saunders *et al*., 2000). The interviews were all conducted remotely, via Zoom or Microsoft Teams, which was ideal during a pandemic where social distancing was necessary. We interviewed 23 women in total, each lasted between 50 and 90 minutes. The interviewing was shared amongst the project team to spread the work fairly and limit bias. We did not interview anyone from our own institutions or who was known to us personally or professionally.

We obtained ethical approval from each of our employing institutions and gained informed consent from our participants. We use pseudonyms and have removed identifying remarks to preserve our participants' anonymity. Our sample consists of the following individuals:

[Table I here]

This is a sample of women who are diverse in terms of career stage, age, marital status, nationality and other characteristics, which we attempt to highlight, where relevant, in our report of findings below. One noticeable feature of the group is the low proportion who have children reliant on them within the home, which suggests that parental roles are less likely to conflict with professional roles than in the broader sample of women academics working in the global context. This is an unsurprising skew given that the women in our sample self-identified as having flourished during a pandemic, where mothers on the whole fared poorly (Anderson and Kelliher, 2020).

Our interview questions were informed by our aim to explore how some women flourished in the WFH context of the Covid-19 pandemic. We conducted a deliberately deductive analysis, "this approach entails the use of pre-ordinate themes, through the application of an explicit theoretical framework developed through engagement with the literature" (Proudfoot, 2022, p. 308), in other words key themes were taken to data, rather than emerging from it. We did so because we sought to explore the validity of our theoretical model (figure 1) and how this applies within the research setting. Analysis was conducted by the lead author, and later validated by the co-authors, it entailed coding and extracting incidents of identity work and job crafting (appendix 1 details the specific codes used in our analysis). We now outline our findings.

Results

Slow Academia

Our interpretation of our respondents' pandemic experiences is that they took agency in, what was for them, a conducive context to reshape their lives and craft the task, and relational, boundaries of their jobs, and they did so in line with the principles of slow academia. Bosanquet and Sturm (2023) explain that "slow academia is often defined in the negative as a resistance to the pace of accelerated academia in the neoliberal university – something other than frenetic, competitive, metricised, anxiety-promoting academic performativity". Drawing on the chapter headings of Berg and Seeber's (2016) text 'The Slow Professor' we surmise that there are four main behaviors/attitudes that together represent slow academia: 1) managing time differently and embracing timelessness; 2) taking the time to find pleasure; 3) finding time for research and deep understanding; and 4) embracing collegiality, community and collaboration (we renamed and conflated these somewhat for ease of process, whilst being mindful of not losing analytical richness). Below, in our report of findings, we use these as sub-section headings to structure the narrative, revealing each as a form of job crafting. Simultaneously we observed instances of identity work being undertaken by our respondents and signpost these through our commentary.

1) Managing time differently and embracing timelessness

Berg and Seeber (2016) talk about slow academics finding new approaches to time management and, in particular, enjoying a sense of timelessness where time feels unbounded and tasks are not constrained by deadlines. Our data suggest that this was replicated by our participants when WFH during the Covid-19 pandemic. Kim told us "*I really like the autonomy, like I can start and stop work whenever I want"*. She expanded:

> *"So it's, like, the traditional nine to five doesn't super exist with me. So I still try to follow them as guidelines. But I like that, you know, I can kind of wake up whenever I want, like, maybe at 8, and then just kind of slowly start working. And, you know, I*

don't have to clock in or clock out. So as long as I get the job done, no one really cares… I feel like yeah, I have more time to myself".

Reflecting on a different way to organize her time during lockdown, Laura details an example of behavioral job crafting:

"I was really able to structure the day in whatever way I wanted. If I wanted to sleep until 10, I did that. No problem. And also, because I live in another city - so normally takes me about an hour to get to university - obviously, I did not have that, I could just get up and sit in my pajamas in front of the computer and work. So that was, for me, really nice that I did not have any constraints in, like, time or I had to be there or do something at a specific time, I could just do whatever I wanted whenever I wanted. Yeah, I really felt like I was completely free".

Laura and Kim both live with partners but do not have children, which is likely to have provided them with greater agency than mothers to structure their time as they wished. Cassie, a Head of Department, expressed that this freedom resulted in a sense of balance: *"It means that you can mix your personal and professional life a little bit more so you can rebalance. I think that that's what I have - that rebalance".* She also offered an explanation as to why this was the case for her whilst WFH: "*Because you do, when you're in the workplace, you can get pressured, you know, it's more difficult to say 'no'".* Here she is articulating the sense of pressure to attend to other people's demands that she feels when physically on campus, which is a feature of her leadership role in more usual times. We read this rejection of being a 'yes person' or 'people pleaser' as an example of her cognitive identity work. WFH during a pandemic seems to have given these women academics the opportunity to reclaim autonomy over their time, and this evoked positive emotions.

June, like others in the sample, speaks here of her desire to continue practices she engaged in during lockdowns even beyond the pandemic period, suggesting an intention to extend this

behavioral change around her job - and adopt new way of seeing herself (cognitive identity revision) as an individual who is more successful at achieving balance:

"there is something to be said for not starting every day with a frantic 30-minute drive through rush hour traffic and there's something to be said for having the space to focus on something. And it is something I know I've not been very successful at [before the pandemic], *but I do want to try and keep some balance of it as I go forward".*

2) Taking the time to find pleasure

Berg and Seeber's (2016) chapter 'Pedagogy and Pleasure' was the starting point for this theme and we did find some participants discussing the joy of utilizing new, online, pedagogic approaches and working with students in new ways, such as Layla, an international scholar, whose quote below could be seen as strengthening her academic identity:

> "*that was another positive for me, you know, a new way of teaching. Certainly, I was familiar with the sort of distance learning approach, but not so much on a daily basis. So everything, as you know, was essentially online. So, in terms of learning new technology, related skills, that was definitely a plus*".

However, as the boundaries of academic work became blurred for many during Covid times, we expanded the theme to represent the pleasure taken from life more generally during lockdown, and a new approach to finding joy in an otherwise stressful period.

Cassie, for example, talked about reconnecting with nature: "*having more time to, you know, to be outside in the daylight in the winter, to engage with my hobbies, which is gardening, and looking after my dogs*". Others discussed different hobbies that they found the time for such as Laura: "*I believe I enjoyed it, I get some joy, to spend more time at home. I picked up like other hobbies I didn't do for a long time. Started playing piano again. And reading and just stuff I used to enjoy. Before* [the pandemic] *I would run around and do too many things*".

Our participants talked about prioritizing important relationships, for example, Kim, who said "*my partner and I, I think being stuck together for a long time has really kind of improved our relationship quality, for the most part. And now that we're both exclusively working from home, it's nice to see each other during the day*".

Amira, who works part time, talked about being more deliberate about prioritizing her relationship with her partner:

> "*before this pandemic, maybe I didn't think too much about it. It kind of came naturally. It's a Friday we go out, it's the weekend let's go see something. But now, during the lockdowns, we are all at home. So we have to think about how to spend this time, quality time, together. And like, another effect of this pandemic, is now I'm consciously planning those quality times, rather than waiting for them to happen*".

This excerpt from Kim's interview reveals that she too was more deliberate and selective with her time use:

> "*It was a nice opportunity to rethink what I use my energy for... And just these engagements, like groups or events, committees, are stuff that I would just carry on for a long time. And I just never said 'I'm stopping now'. And now being more careful in thinking about 'do I really want to use my energy for that? Or my time?', and not just start picking things again, and running around all the time. So yeah, I guess working from home and being at home, that has definitely changed me. I now more carefully think about which things I want to do, which groups I choose to participate in*".

We note in particular her claim that WFH *'has definitely changed me'* – confirmation that identity work (cognitive revision) has followed from the recrafting of her working practices. She also expressed shedding some relationships in order to give more time to others:

> "*so I fell out of touch with some friends. … you know, I've become a lot closer to a select few people over locked down, because we made an effort to call each other or meet when things were kind of opening up. So I feel like I don't have as many, like, shallow friends anymore. But I have like, I'm a lot better in touch with my closer friends*".

Amira concluded that the experience has changed her priorities:

> "*work should support life rather than 'we live to work' … before I was more focusing on what I do at work and try to get better, but now I try to make it a bit more, I don't know, that I'm thinking… there are other things that I can do and I'm not only an employee of this institution*".

Seeing herself as more than just an employee is an expansion to her concept of self. Cassie's quote below shows that it was the changed spatial and temporal regimes that lockdown offered, which enabled her more control over how to use her time and switch between roles (from writer to dog walker). Again, this resulted in the expression of positive emotions and feelings of being energized and balanced:

> "*It was quite good to feel that I can stop. You know I've had enough of this. So this is really annoying me. Or I've got writer's block or… and you just go and do something else, which is, you know, quite physical and pleasant, like walking the dogs, and then you come back, and you know you've got renewed energy when you can go back to it, and I think that's part of the balance of life that I quite like*".

3) Finding time for research and deep understanding

Berg and Seeber (2016) stress that we need to reconnect with the very purpose of academia and cite Fanghanel's (2012, p. 82) summary of the ideals of academia as "discovery, enquiry, and intellectual advancement". They echo Collini's (2012) rejection of the commodification

of knowledge and insist that new relationships with time can lead to deeper understanding and solutions to global challenges.

Layla, like other participants in our sample, managed to find time for scholarship during the pandemic: "*the fact that I'm now working from home, in terms of my job role as an academic, I'm able to engage more time for writing and research*". We see this as cognitive activity to repair the academic identity, bringing it back to a more traditional conceptualization of someone who has time to think and develop knowledge.

Laura comments on the lack of distractions experienced whilst WFH:

> "*because it was lockdown there wasn't that much else to do. So it wasn't a problem that I worked more …I didn't have anything else to do. That was actually nice, to have something that I could do to pass the time… So it was nice to focus just on one thing. And being able to just put more energy into that and not just running around all the time. So I enjoyed that part. I could focus more*".

This, she suggests, gave her more time to focus deeply on one thing at a time and she expressed that she derived enjoyment from doing so. We again highlight that Laura does not have childcare responsibilities which could have hindered this ability to focus.

Amira told us that: "*during the pandemic, we have prepared a dedicated book for the professor who taught us. And the experience of preparing that book helps quite a lot to cope with the stress coming from the pandemic*". This reveals the mental health gains that engaging in scholarship afforded her. She went on to explain a pivot in the type of research she undertook during the pandemic: "*I have focused more on producing research that I think is meaningful, and will be helpful*".

4) Embracing collegiality, community and collaboration

Berg and Seeber (2016) feature a chapter in their book about 'collegiality and community' and conclude the text with a call for more collaboration and 'thinking together' to enrich

academia. June, a Course Leader, talks about online working bringing new possibilities for communicating with colleagues: "*so working relationships… you'd find yourself talking a lot more to certain people because it was easy to get hold of them. You didn't have to go to a different building, you could send them a message and maybe call them for 5 minutes*" and Layla, a mid-career academic, talks about the importance of technology in maintaining wider professional relationships: "*well, from a professional sort of work context,* [I'm] *quite proud and the fact that I did manage to maintain those research and academic sort of relationships, even though that was through the medium of technology, managed to publish papers, managed to progress my research*".

Cassie spoke of the possibilities that virtual working afforded for building an international network. She seems to have developed a revised identity, now seeing herself as 'a convenor' of others:

> "*in many ways it's enabled me to meet with people that were not reachable. So we were able to call anybody at conferences, because you know that, they're at their desk or dining room, table, or whatever. So that was quite good… I'm interacting with people all over the world. So I've got a big research network which I now convene. So, actually, people are all over the place, and suddenly, you know, they were on a par with people that were next door, because we were all online, you know, whether it was from New Zealand or whatever, we were all online*".

Amira talked passionately about the value of working with collaborators and how this provided valued respite and a sense of shared purpose during the pandemic: "*so everything's awful, nothing's working, people are dying. But I have this, I don't know, half an hour, 45 minutes with them, a call where we think only about how this amazing book is going to come*". We see the maintaining and building of professional networks online during the

Covid-19 crisis as strengthening these women's academic identities, as they represent their institutions, and themselves, on a global stage.

Discussion

Empirical Contribution

Previous studies have shed light on the challenges faced by a range of women during the pandemic (e.g. Blell *et al*., 2023), our empirical contribution is data showing how positive outcomes were achieved by some women academics through the adoption of principles of slow academia.

It is of course crucial to recognize that not all women had the same opportunities during Covid - our sample largely consists of those without children for example, and none reported other substantial care responsibilities, disabilities, long-term illness, inflexible work processes or adversarial managers. These circumstances are likely to have afforded them the prospect of engaging in the reflection, dialogue and activity required to transform their work and identities.

Examples of our findings that reflect the goals of slow academia include: regaining control of working hours (Kim, Laura) and projects (Layla, Amira); reconfiguring relationships (Kim, Amira, June); and achieving a renewed sense of pleasure (Laura, Cassie).

Slow principles take us back to the very purpose of universities by enabling the type of quality research and thinking that contribute to the solving of 'global challenges' (Universities UK, 2023) – as was illustrated by Amira's description of engaging in a meaningful and collaborative book project. In ordinary times, neoliberal higher education contexts present ideological, structural and cultural barriers to the achievement of this fundamental goal, which are especially exclusionary for women scholars, and which for many became more even pronounced during the WFH context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Slow academia, therefore, is intriguing for its emancipatory potential, aligned with feminist ideals. It is important to stress, however, that the heterogeneity of women academics means that some will be denied the agency to enact its principles, including those who have been historically marginalized and those on short-term contracts and precarious tenure tracks.

Theoretical Contribution

Our data features examples of job crafting and identity work enabled by the new temporal and spatial regimes of WFH during lockdown. We present instances of women academics engaging in cognitive (the way they think about), discursive (the way they talk about), physical (the way they present/ use resources) and behavioral (the way they act) crafting of both jobs and selves.

All of the respondents demonstrate job crafting in line with at least one of the principles of slow academia, as detailed in the section above. And examples of identity work include Cassie's revision of self from people pleaser to people convenor; June from frantic commuter to successful balancer; Kim from habitual attender of events to deliberate and selective friend; and Laura from frequently on the move to hobbyist and musician.

Identity work (Caza *et al*., 2018) and job crafting (Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001) were hitherto considered and applied separately. In our interpretation it is evident that the crafting of jobs and of selves go hand in hand, albeit only through the exercise of individual agency and within a conducive context - this validates our initial conceptualization of these theories, which we represent in figure 1.

Our findings suggest that the adoption of these processes is iterative and hard to unpick, for example in Cassie's case she redefined the boundaries of her role (job crafting) which led to new self-meanings (identity work) and intentions to engage in new projects and roles (back to job crafting), resulting in a further revision to how she sees herself (identity work).

Following our empirical research we are also confident in proposing that where job crafting and identity work are undertaken together the result can be a sense of flourishing and subsequently more sustainable careers, and use this opportunity to amplify claims that both identity work and job crafting have emancipatory potential (Alvesson and Wilmott, 2002; Wrzesniewski *et al*., 2013) for gender equality.

These positive outcomes of combining job crafting and identity work are exemplified by our sample, who all reported the counter-intuitive experience of flourishing during a pandemic – no mean feat for women academics in the masculine, neoliberal context of contemporary higher education. There are specific examples in our data of respondents achieving a sense of meaning (Amira), balance (Kim) and wellbeing (Cassie) – components of flourishing - resultant from these processes and stating a determination not to return to the way things were before (e.g. June).

In providing this empirically-supported theorization we address the call of Wrzesniewski *et al*. (2013) for explanations of the mechanisms through which job crafting is likely to cultivate a positive sense of identity and hope to prompt identity scholars to further explore the intersections of job crafting and identity processes.

Limitations

Every study, no matter how compelling, has its limitations, and it is crucial to acknowledge those within our own. We recognize that our sample size presents certain limitations concerning the traditional notions of data generalizability. While we do not claim data generalization, we place value on the ecological validity of our data. This study provides a deep and nuanced understanding of the experiences of 23 women academics during the pandemic, offering insights and lessons that may resonate with a broader audience, even if the specifics may vary. It is crucial to emphasize that acknowledging these limitations does

not diminish the power and value of our data. Rather, it highlights the importance of considering these factors when interpreting and applying our findings in different contexts.

Practical implications

Whilst we frame the experiences of our respondents as aligned with the principles of slow academia there is no indication that any were conscious of the existence of this movement, nor did they claim that they had mindfully entered into an exercise of job crafting and identity work in order to find positive outcomes during a pandemic. This suggests to us an opportunity to bring these ideas to the attention of the academic community, so that, rather than a retrospective realization imposed by others, academics themselves could seize whatever agency they may have within their settings and purposefully adopt these strategies. Managers / leaders in higher education should prioritize creating more conducive contexts, for example, by initiating open and candid career conversations as a means to encourage a deliberate slowing down of work, aligning with the principles of slow academia which rank work quality over relentless productivity, as a potential antidote to neoliberalism.

Conclusion

We sought to answer the question *How did some women academics flourish during the Covid-19 pandemic when others did not?* Our exploration reveals that this was achieved through the adoption of job crafting and identity work practices to engage with the principles of slow academia. For the small group of women in our sample this was accomplished only when the context was conducive for individual agency to be exercised. These calm waters meant that they avoided the perfect storm that lockdown created for others. Together the empirical, theoretical and practical contributions of this paper illuminate lessons from a pandemic that we hope can lead to opportunities for gender parity in academia post-Covid-19.

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Figure 1. How Identity Work and Job Crafting Relate

Goals	Common Modes	Common Requirements
To achieve a sense of meaningfulness in work by: • Transforming the task, or relational, boundaries of one's job • Forming; repairing; maintaining; strengthening; revising; rejecting collective, role, and personal self-meanings	• Cognitive • Discursive • Physical • Behavioral	Individual Agency Conducive Contexts

Table I. Overview of Sample

Pseudonym	Age Range	Marial Status	Children
Amira	25 to 30	Partner	None
Emily	40 to 45	Husband	Three
Laura	40 to 45	Partner	None
Siobhan	40 to 45	Husband	None
Emma	60 to 65	Husband	None
Claire	55 to 60	Husband	Two grown-up children
Kim	30 to 35	Partner	None
Layla	30 to 35	Single	None
Kathy	45 to 50	Partner	None
Jenny	30 to 35	Husband	None
Kristina	30 to 35	Husband	None
Catherine	40 to 45	Husband	Two
Cassie	50 to 55	Partner	One grown-up child
Patricia	45 to 50	Husband	Two
Sasha	30 to 35	Single	None
Patty	30 to 35	Husband	One
Beth	35 to 40	Husband	None
June	45 to 50	Single	None
Ava	55 to 60	Single	None
Isobel	35 to 40	Single	None
Olivia	35 to 40	Husband	Two
Brenda	45 to 50	Husband	None

Brisa	40 to 45	Husband	None

Appendix 1. Themes and Codes used in Data Analysis

Themes related to Identity Work	**Codes used for Identity Work**
Modes:	
Cognitive	IWMC
Discursive	IWMD
Physical	IWMP
Behavioral	IWMB
Goals:	
Forming	IWGF
Repairing	IWGREP
Maintaining	IWGM
Strengthening	IWGS
Revising	IWGREV
Rejecting	IWGREJ
…collective, role, and personal self-meanings	
(from Caza *et al*, 2018)	
Codes related to Job Crafting	**Codes used for Job Crafting**
Modes:	
Physical	JCMP
Cognitive	JCMC
(from Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001)	
Behavioral	JCMB
(from Zhang and Parker, 2018)	
Discursive	JCMD
(added by the authors)	
Goals:	
To change the:	
Task, or	JCGT
Relational boundaries	JCGRB
…of one's work	
(from Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001)	