

ARTICLE

‘HOLIDAYS ARE HOLIDAYS, RIGHT?’ BRAZILIAN LECTURERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL LIVES¹

MAYARA DA MOTA MATOS¹

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6299-5910>

<mayara.matos@unifal-mg.edu.br>

REBECCA SANDERSON²

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0646-7720>

<RSanderson@lincoln.ac.uk>

RORAIMA ALVES DA COSTA FILHO³

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8452-7576>

<roraimeaacfilho@gmail.com>

ROBERTO TADEU IAOCHITE⁴

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1476-6253>

<roberto.iaochite@unesp.br>

¹ Federal University of Alfenas (UNIFAL-MG). Poços de Caldas, MG, Brazil.

² University of Lincoln. Lincoln, LN, England.

³ Rio Claro Municipal Department of Education. Rio Claro, SP, Brazil.

⁴ São Paulo State University (UNESP-RC). Rio Claro, SP, Brazil.

ABSTRACT: Work-life balance in higher education has been extensively studied, however, understanding the academic work culture in the Global South, specifically in Brazil, remains limited. This article explores Brazilian lecturers' perceptions of the interface between professional and personal life. Drawing on 516 responses to a questionnaire about using non-work time for academic tasks, and referencing the philosopher Byung-Chul Han and sociologist Lewis Coser, we identified five key themes that offer a valuable contribution to this gap: the complexity of tasks and environments, excessive dedication, strategies of adaptation, costs of adaptation, and strategies of resistance. Academics in Brazil grapple with intricate workloads in environments that often do not bolster their efforts, resulting in blurred boundaries between their professional and personal lives. Some view their roles with a vocational passion or derive pleasure from their tasks, while others are besieged by their professional demands. This dedication can lead to guilt, affecting both personal relationships and well-being. To navigate these challenges, many adopt rigorous planning, yet the ongoing encroachment of work responsibilities can lead to exhaustion, stress, and health complications. A segment of academics, influenced by significant

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life events, resorts to strategies that emphasize the distinction between work and leisure, often treating holidays as sacrosanct rest periods. This study underscores the need for self-awareness and individualized strategies to manage work overload, and calls for a broader challenge to the prevalent culture of productivism in academia and its ramifications on university life. Underpinning the discussion is the “Health promoting universities” as a possibility for future change and health promotion for the entire academic community.

KeyWords: academic work; work-life balance; productivism; Brazilian lecturers; higher education.

“FÉRIAS SÃO FÉRIAS, NÉ?!” PERCEPÇÕES DE DOCENTES BRASILEIROS SOBRE A RELAÇÃO ENTRE A VIDA PROFISSIONAL E A VIDA PESSOAL

RESUMO: O equilíbrio entre vida profissional e pessoal no ensino superior tem sido amplamente estudado, mas a compreensão da cultura de trabalho acadêmico no Sul Global, especificamente no Brasil, é limitada. Este artigo explora as percepções de professores universitários brasileiros sobre a interface entre vida profissional e pessoal. Baseando-se em 516 respostas a um questionário sobre o uso do tempo fora do trabalho para tarefas acadêmicas e referenciando o filósofo Byung-Chul Han e o sociólogo Lewis Coser, foram identificados cinco temas principais que ajudam a preencher essa lacuna: complexidade das tarefas e ambientes, dedicação excessiva, estratégias de adaptação, custos de adaptação e estratégias de resistência. Docentes universitários no Brasil enfrentam cargas de trabalho intrincadas em ambientes que muitas vezes não apoiam seus esforços, resultando em limites difusos entre suas vidas profissionais e pessoais. Alguns veem seus papéis com uma paixão vocacional ou obtêm prazer de suas tarefas, enquanto outros são assediados pelas demandas profissionais. Essa dedicação pode levar à culpa, afetando tanto as relações pessoais quanto o bem-estar. Para lidar com esses desafios, muitos adotam um planejamento rigoroso, mas a constante invasão de responsabilidades de trabalho pode induzir cansaço, estresse e complicações de saúde. Um segmento de acadêmicos, influenciados por eventos significativos na vida, recorre a estratégias que destacam a delimitação entre trabalho e lazer, frequentemente tratando as férias como períodos sagrados de descanso. Este estudo destaca a necessidade de autoconsciência e estratégias individualizadas para gerenciar a sobrecarga de trabalho e faz um apelo para um desafio mais amplo à cultura prevalente do produtivismo na academia e suas ramificações na vida universitária. Subjacente à discussão, está a ideia de “universidades promotoras de saúde” como uma possibilidade de mudanças futuras e promoção da saúde para toda a comunidade acadêmica.

Palavras-chave: trabalho acadêmico; equilíbrio entre vida profissional e pessoal; produtivismo; professores universitários brasileiros; ensino superior.

‘LAS VACACIONES SON VACACIONES, ¿VERDAD?’ PERCEPCIONES DE LOS PROFESORES BRASILEÑOS SOBRE LA RELACIÓN ENTRE SUS VIDAS PROFESIONALES Y PERSONALES

RESUMEN: El equilibrio entre vida laboral y personal en la Educación superior ha sido ampliamente estudiado, pero la comprensión de la cultura de trabajo académico en el Sur Global, específicamente en Brasil, es limitada. Este artículo explora las percepciones de los docentes brasileños sobre la interfaz entre la vida profesional y personal. Basándose en 516 respuestas a un cuestionario sobre el uso del tiempo fuera del trabajo para tareas académicas y haciendo referencia al filósofo Byung-Chul Han y al sociólogo Lewis Coser, se identificaron cinco temas clave que contribuyen de manera valiosa a esta brecha: complejidad de las tareas y entornos, dedicación excesiva, estrategias de adaptación, costos de adaptación y estrategias de resistencia. Los académicos en Brasil lidian con cargas de trabajo complejas en entornos

que a menudo no respaldan sus esfuerzos, lo que resulta en fronteras difusas entre sus vidas profesionales y personales. Algunos ven sus roles con una pasión vocacional o derivan placer de sus tareas, mientras que otros se ven asediados por sus demandas profesionales. Esta dedicación puede llevar a la culpa, afectando tanto las relaciones personales como el bienestar. Para navegar estos desafíos, muchos adoptan una planificación rigurosa, pero la invasión perpetua de las responsabilidades laborales puede inducir agotamiento, estrés y complicaciones de salud. Un segmento de académicos, influenciados por eventos significativos en la vida, recurre a estrategias que enfatizan la delimitación entre el trabajo y el ocio, tratando a menudo las vacaciones como períodos sagrados de descanso. Este estudio subraya la necesidad de autoconciencia y estrategias individualizadas para gestionar la sobrecarga de trabajo y llama a un desafío más amplio a la cultura prevalente del productivismo en la academia y sus ramificaciones en la vida universitaria. En el trasfondo de la discusión está la idea de “universidades promotoras de salud” como una posibilidad de cambios futuros y promoción de la salud para toda la comunidad académica.

Palabras clave: trabajo académico; equilibrio entre vida laboral y personal; productivismo; docentes brasileños de universidad; educación superior.

INTRODUCTION

In Brazil, Higher Education (HE) growth has aimed to reduce social inequality and promote development. However, since the 1990s, neoliberal economic policies have influenced the working conditions of universities and faculty in Brazil. Arguably, economic interest has taken precedence over the development of scientific knowledge and education. Consequently, public universities have faced budget cuts and reduced funding for research and staff hiring.

The investment in public universities through the *Programa de Apoio a Planos de Reestruturação e Expansão das Universidades Federais* (REUNI- Program to Support Restructuring and Expansion Plans of Federal Universities) in 2007 led to an increase in the number of public universities and undergraduate students. Due to Brazil's expansionist policy, the HE system has quadrupled enrolment in 20 years (INEP, 2018). However, while REUNI has contributed to democratizing public universities, it has also led to a disorderly expansion due to the lack of resources, lecturers, and non-academic staff to support the increased number of students (Guerra & Rocha, 2019). This has resulted in more work for lecturers, increased job insecurity – for example, through frozen salaries, and understaffing.

Because of these financial and personnel constraints, the demands on academic staff have increased. There is now greater pressure to produce high-quality research, obtain funding for projects, and internationalize institutions. Recent research has identified several issues, including work overload, increased institutional control and bureaucracy, and negative impacts on lecturers' mental health (Campos et al., 2020; Fernandes et al., 2022).

Alongside research and teaching, Brazilian academics are responsible for university management, as there are no professionals hired specifically for this role and for extension activities², which involve the university's engagement with society to promote social and economic development. Consequently, lecturers in Brazil must undertake four distinct types of work: teaching, research, management, and extension. Despite these multiple responsibilities, lecturers do not receive adequate support from the government, and higher education institutions are poorly resourced to support this work (Amaral, 2019).

² Often translated as “service-learning” or “community outreach,” these university initiatives engage with the community to share knowledge, provide services, and foster social development. In Latin America, extension is a key component of higher education, complementing teaching and research by addressing local needs and promoting inclusion.

In addition to these challenges, university lecturers have faced a political environment that has undermined their work in recent years. Politically motivated media narratives have decreased the prestige of the academic profession, questioned the validity of scientific knowledge, and challenged the legitimacy of the scientific process (Amaral, 2019). This context has been linked to mental health and well-being challenges. Several recent studies carried out with university lecturers in Brazil have shown that they are affected by burnout and common mental health disorders (Alves et al., 2019; Costa, 2012; Leite et al., 2019; Massa et al., 2016). For example, Baptista et al. (2019) found that 52% of participants working at São Paulo universities exhibited burnout symptoms. Matos, Sharp, and Iaochite (2022) noted that 229 of 1709 participating lecturers had high levels of emotional exhaustion and medium levels of depersonalization and personal accomplishment, indicating a risk of burnout. In another research, Neme and Limongi (2019) found that 29.6% of participants met the diagnostic criteria for a mental health disorder and that one of the risk factors associated with mental health difficulties was mental exhaustion caused by intense workload.

These issues are not exclusive to Brazil, as the literature on lecturers' health and work highlights worsening conditions worldwide over the last decade (Cao et al., 2018; Enders et al., 2015; Garcia Padilla et al., 2017; Hall et al., 2019; Oliveira et al., 2021). However, systematic reviews on work-life balance in HE indicate greater concern about this topic in the Global North, especially the United States (Franco et al., 2021). These outcomes reveal the need for new studies on work-life balance (WLB) in Brazil, particularly those integrating all facets of work in universities.

Han (2015) argues that individuals in contemporary society find themselves forced to maximise their performance, leading to a state of constant exhaustion. The author critiques the pressure for productivity and self-optimisation that characterises the current work world and asserts that nowadays individuals are not only exploited by the economic system but also self-exploitation. In the pursuit of success and personal fulfilment, workers subject themselves to gruelling work hours, acting both as the exploiter and the exploited, which results in widespread burnout. In this paper, we use Han's perspective to analyse the relationship between lecturers' perceptions of their work relationship and their personal lives.

Drawing on Coser's (1974) work, the concept of 'greedy institutions' could help explain how lecturers experience work at universities. Coser (1974) uses this term to describe organisations or social structures that demand total and unquestioning commitment from their members, analysing how these institutions can exert deep control over individuals, compromising their autonomy, causing tensions, and pressuring their members to dedicate themselves intensely to the work. This often leads to a level of loyalty and devotion that exceeds healthy boundaries. One of Coser's (1974) central contributions is the analysis of conflicts and tensions that arise in contexts of extreme commitment, examining how the demands of greedy institutions often conflict with individual needs and aspirations, resulting in ethical and emotional dilemmas for the involved members.

In sum, the literature suggests that excessive workload permeates academic staff's lives. Studies associate overwork with physical and mental illnesses, absenteeism, reduced quality of life, decreased job satisfaction, and negative impacts on teaching quality (Matos, Sharp & Iaochite, 2022; Alves et al., 2019; Costa, 2012; Leite et al., 2019; Massa et al., 2016). Considering the existing evidence, this article aims to understand how Brazilian lecturers at public universities make sense of these professional demands and how those demands impact their personal lives. To illuminate how their experience of professional demands is created, perceived, and acted upon, the authors draw upon Lewis Coser's (1974) work on 'greedy institutions' and philosopher Byung-Chul Han's (2015) work on the 'achievement society'.

Therefore, this paper aims to discern how Brazilian lecturers navigate and interpret their roles' demands and the subsequent ramifications on their personal lives. While academics' WLB have been extensively studied, there is a notable gap in understanding these dynamics in Brazil, where cultural, political, and institutional contexts differ significantly (Franco et al., 2021). By employing the theoretical frameworks of Byung-Chul Han and Lewis Coser, this study offers a unique lens to analyse the empirical

data collected from Brazilian lecturers. These frameworks allow us to explore not only the external pressures of academic work but also the internalized demands and self-exploitation that characterize contemporary academic life.

Thus, this paper contributes to the global discourse on academic WLB by providing a nuanced understanding of how Brazilian lecturers perceive and adapt to their professional demands, highlighting the interplay between institutional expectations and individual agency. Furthermore, it enriches the broader conversation on educators' health and well-being by situating these challenges within the specific socio-political context of Brazilian higher education. By integrating Han's and Coser's theories with empirical data, this study addresses a gap in the literature and offers new insights into how academic work-life balance is negotiated in a context where the boundaries between professional and personal life are increasingly blurred.

METHOD

This work presents findings from a broader investigation into the health and quality of life of lecturers across Brazil, conducted between October 2019 and January 2020.

Data collection

The original study was conducted during the first author's doctoral program (Matos, 2021). It was a mixed-methods study with online data collection using a sociodemographic questionnaire and three other quantitative questionnaires. The original sociodemographic questionnaire comprised 64 questions, 2 of which were open-ended, is available in her thesis (Matos, 2021). Given the purpose of this article, we conduct a qualitative analysis of responses to a single open-ended question from the sociodemographic questionnaire. Hence, this paper draws on participants' answers to the question: 'Several authors have pointed out that there is currently less and less separation between the workspace and personal life of university professors. In this sense, for example, some lecturers use their holiday time to participate in conferences. How does this happen in your case?'. We also explored the participants' characterization data in the next subsection. The answers in Portuguese were translated into English for analysis.

After the lead institution's ethical approval, a questionnaire was administered online. The questionnaire link was available on the "Online Pesquisa" website and disseminated by e-mail, either upon request from the universities' Human Resources department or directly to the lecturers when available on their university's websites. The link was also shared on social media, including Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube.

Participants

A sample of 1,397 participants, from different universities across all regions of Brazil, responded to the open-ended question. An initial data-cleansing process removed short responses unsuitable for further analysis (e.g., yes/no responses or left blank), leaving 516 participant comments. In this sense, 516 lecturers participated in this research; slightly over half of these were women (54.5%). The most selected age range was 40-49 years (33.7%), married (74.4%), and with children (64.6%). Most respondents assessed their health as good (45.8%) or average (39%). The majority had a doctoral title (94%) and between 6 and 10 years of experience teaching in Higher Education (26.2%).

Data analysis

The researchers employed inductive, data-driven thematic analysis to identify codes and patterns in participants' responses to the open-ended question (Nowell et al., 2017). The initial coding

round was performed in Microsoft Excel in two steps: first, applying the inclusion criteria, classifying data from the 1397 participants as ‘suitable for further analysis’ or ‘not suitable for further analysis’ based on the level of detail provided by respondents (yes or no answers were coded as not suitable for further analysis and no further exploration). Secondly, the remaining participants’ responses were coded as “participants use their free time for working” or “participants don’t use their free time for working” to determine the frequency with which participants engaged in work tasks outside working hours. By doing this, we also identified first-round codes to start the coding process.

Following the steps described by Braun and Clark (2006), the coders familiarized themselves with the data and independently generated initial codes and memos. Both descriptive and simultaneous codes were produced, reflecting the richness and complexity of the responses (Saldaña, 2015). The authors applied a pattern coding process, grouping codes into ‘explanatory or inferential codes, ones that identify an emergent theme, configuration, or explanation’ (Saldaña, 2015, p. 236) to create overarching themes from the codes. This stage of analysis was theoretically informed by relevant literature, in particular Han’s (2015, 2019) and Coser’s (1974) work, which provided useful theoretical perspectives on both the individual and organisational factors at play. Further details of the relationships between codes and themes are presented in Table 1.

Three of the authors work in institutions in Brazil, bringing ‘insider knowledge’ that aided the interpretation of the data, while the other author drew on her experience as an early-career researcher in the United Kingdom higher education. These perspectives enabled the authors to mobilise their tacit knowledge to shape their interpretation of the data; however, they had to maintain a reflexive and critical stance, remaining sensitive to participants’ experiences that did not align with their own (Lazard & McAvoy, 2020). To this end, the coders met regularly to critically review their coding and interpretation. Two authors independently coded all the data, another reviewed the coding, and the last one independently reviewed the final analysis. To ensure intracoder reliability among the coders, the third author extracted and coded random samples of responses ($n = 70$) until acceptable intracoder reliability was achieved within the coded sample. A 92% agreement between coders was achieved, considered good internal consistency (Miles et al., 2014).

FINDINGS

Of the initial 1397 participants, the majority reported using their free time for work-related tasks (65.7%) and stated that they did not cope well with work demands (60.7%). The following results are based on 516 quotes that met the inclusion criteria for further analysis. We found that 324 of the 516 participants (62.8%) presented a ‘permeable boundary’ between work and life; that is, they did not have a clear boundary between their professional and personal, family, or leisure activities, and frequently worked beyond their contractual hours. In contrast, 143 (27.7%) participants claimed to have a strong boundary between personal and work lives, while 49 (9.5%) tried to establish one but struggled to do so.

From the analysis, five overarching themes emerged that summarised the challenges participants experienced. These themes, along with the codes from which they were generated, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 – Themes, codes, and frequency ($n=1080$)

Theme description	Signification Code	Quotes	Freq %
Complexity of tasks and environment (5.3%)	Management	18	1.7
Navigating the complexity of the internal and external environment of HE creates pressures	Bureaucracy	15	1.4
	Environment not suitable for intellectual work	11	1.0

and a day-to-day work environment which can create barriers to managing workload effectively.	Political scenario	8	0.7
	Lack of support	4	0.4
	Multitasking	1	0.1
Excessive dedication (10.7%)	Catch up on work	55	5.1
Perceptions about the nature of academic work as a ‘sacred duty’ or a ‘vocation’, a narrative which justifies the intense professional demands.	Work as pleasure	38	3.5
	Guilt	14	1.3
	Duty	5	0.5
	Financial struggles	3	0.3
	Using own money for work	1	0.1
Adaptation strategies(18.5%)	Graduate programs	64	5.9
Strategies used by participants to adapt to universities’ demands.	Research activities	55	5.1
	Work overload	52	4.8
	Role conflict	13	1.2
	Teaching activities	10	0.9
	Academic relationships	6	0.6
Adaptation costs (37.6%)	Permeable boundary between work and life	318	29.4
Participants accounts of how permeable work-life boundaries lead them to health and family issues.	Digital intrusion	45	4.2
	Difficulty switching off	26	2.4
	Health problems	11	1.0
	Family issues	5	0.5
	Productivism	1	0.1
Resistance strategies (27.9%)	Strong boundary between work and life	142	13.1
Strategies described to manage or resist the intrusion of work into participants’ personal lives.	Struggle to maintain a boundary between work and life	49	4.5
	Travelling and holidays	33	3.1
	Change in priorities (maternity or paternity)	29	2.7
	Change in priorities (Health)	26	2.4
	Planning and organisation strategies	14	1.3
	Balance	3	0.3
	Change in priorities (Experience)	3	0.3

Retirement	2	0.2
Total	1080	100

Notes: The quotes refer to the number of times the category is mentioned, not the number of participants who mention it.
Source: Research material.

These themes are explored in more detail below.

Complexity of tasks and environment

The first theme describes the complexity of the workload participants were trying to manage in an environment that did not always support them. Participants documented their perceptions of the excessive demands and pressures associated with the job that forced them to dedicate themselves to more than one task at a time to save time and maximise productivity:

I always bring work home with me. I associate domestic activities with leisure activities to have the feeling that I have leisure time. Whenever possible, I do two things at the same time. I drive listening to material that can be used in class, in the waiting room, I correct tests and papers, I cook while watching movies and series, but I'm careful not to do that when the family is around. (Female academic, Life Sciences)

Other lecturers have described the negative effects of bureaucracy and the different roles they must play as lecturers, managers, and researchers.

It is hard to be a serious lecturer in Brazil because there are too many assignments, as far as projects are concerned. The funding agencies are so full of bureaucracy and demands that one would need a private secretary to attend to everything. But no, I have to be: the accountant, the secretary, the researcher, the teacher, and the messenger boy. (Female academic, Life Science)

Many perceived a clear division between 'good' and 'bad' work, the latter being administrative, management tasks while treasuring research, and teaching activities, the time available for which was being squeezed.

The university has increasingly increased the administrative workload by filling numerous systems and databases. This steals time from the creative work at the university. I have seriously considered disengaging from post-graduation programs given the high demand for administrative work. (Female academic, Social Science)

Lecturers described feeling overwhelmed by short deadlines and a lack of support from colleagues and managers. They also highlighted the implications of the political situation on their well-being, including financial struggles related to salary and cost of living. Some participants considered that universities created an inhospitable environment to intellectual work, making them work outside of contractual hours, and during holidays, so they could focus and have silence:

As I am not comfortable with the time and space in the work environment, I always take assignments home during the semester and the holiday period. I am never unoccupied with academic pursuits. Time never seems enough. (Female academic, Health Science)

Excessive dedication

The second theme aggregated responses related to participants' perceptions of the nature of academic work. For some participants, separating personal and professional lives was not a goal because they considered their work a pleasure and, therefore, intrinsically rewarding:

As I like what I do and there is pleasure in the work, I realised there is a clear confusion about the hours I dedicate to it. Preparing an article or mentoring a postgraduate student gives me more pleasure than walking [exercising] - for example. (Male academic, Life Science)

Other participants seemed to welcome the intrusion of professional activities into their personal time; some even framed this as a personal choice:

If you do what you like, it's no sacrifice at all. It's pleasurable. I don't believe in 'professional life', as if working is a punishment. Work is part of life. Full stop. Nobody is forced to do anything. You can choose whether you want to be there or not. (Male, Agri-food Science)
Yes, being a teacher and loving to be a teacher makes this separation difficult - and yes, [I work in] holidays for articles, edicts, conferences... (Female, Agri-food Science)

In addition to these narratives of work as pleasure, some responses show a perception that being a lecturer is a 'sacred duty' or a 'vocation', which justifies the intense professional demands:

I regard my profession as a missionary activity, and I try to make the work as pleasant as possible. Therefore, using holiday periods for scientific activities does not cause me any inconvenience. (Male, Humanities)

Thus, some participants assumed that overwork is fair to entail what they see as privileges of their career:

I believe that this narrowing of work and personal life happens daily because I understand that we have a place of privilege, we need to pay attention to 'give back' to the community. ... As we are specialized professionals and citizens of opinion, there is a constant self-evaluation of class productivity, especially because we have students with financial difficulties (sometimes for food and transportation) that impact the high dropout rate, so there is a daily self-challenge to make the class fruitful, to make it worthwhile. (Female academic, Health Science)

This perception of academic work as a vocation led participants to feel guilty about avoiding out-of-hours or weekend work. This was portrayed as an attempt to catch up on work that never seems to be over. Some also experienced guilt from prioritising work and, consequently, did not give enough attention to family and friends:

Holidays are for finishing articles, writing reports, and preparing projects. Not completely, because the family can also take us away from these activities, but sometimes there is a feeling of guilt for not achieving the productivity that seems necessary for academic work recognition. (Male academic, Humanities)

Adaptation strategies

The third theme considered participants' comments on adapting to universities' demands. The participants developed intensive planning and organisation strategies to manage all their tasks, to deal with work overload, and conflicts between work and family roles:

I try to separate things well. I am very organised, so I don't bring work home and don't miss period deadlines. I rarely work after 6 pm. (Male, Exact and Earth Sciences)
I think that everything depends on organisation and planning; I plan all the things I need to do during the week so I can dedicate the weekend to my family. Sometimes I have to work Saturday morning. But I can organise all the tasks I need to do during the week. (Female, Agri-food Science)

For some participants, the leaking of work into leisure time was evidence of their colleagues' personal failure to self-manage effectively, rather than a systemic overwork issue:

It's up to the teacher not to mix his professional activities with his personal goals. If there is no balance, it really leads to burnout. Most of the lecturers I know are dedicated only to the minimum classes. Others derive pleasure from their research activities and make it their leisure. (Female, Humanities)

I don't take work home with me at all, much less on weekends. I have stressed colleagues who have no free time and are correcting exams on weekends and at night. I play World of Warcraft, as an escape from my boring life, and there I am another person, LOL. ... As for postgraduation [supervising postgraduate students], these are people who need to be in postgraduation for money and status, because they consider themselves more than others. I am out of post-graduation. (Male, Life Science)

Concerning role conflict, accommodating teaching and research activities requires a lot of personal effort in self-management to prevent them from being sidelined by more urgent tasks related to students and bureaucratic requirements:

The department today is divided into two blocks: those in post-graduation and undergraduation, and those only in undergraduation, which creates internal conflicts that hinder strategic action and threaten the preservation of space and power. In this sense, during the holidays, in the calm of the activities, there is greater intellectual intensity for examinations, revisions, and the proposal of articles. (Male, Engineering)

Adaptation costs

This theme considered participants' accounts of the impact of using personal time to accommodate professional demands. Permeable work-life boundaries were connected by many to feelings of exhaustion and difficulties switching off, all of which could negatively impact health, well-being, and personal relationships.

At the moment, I am using my holidays to write book chapters and scientific articles. It is very difficult to write scientific texts during the academic period. ... I've been married for 2 years, and I find it very difficult to balance university work and marriage. At home, I do many work activities and my husband complains a lot. (Female, Humanities)

This seems to be aggravated by digital intrusion, as e-mail, social media, and particularly WhatsApp messages transform job demands into real-time activities, blurring the limits between personal and professional moments, which is intensified by the common practice of sharing personal mobile numbers with students:

Yes, really, the separation between work environment and personal life are at perfect odds! The professional always takes the space of personal life. (Female academic, Science)
It's a feeling of constant demand, especially because of the department and USP as a whole. And the worst thing is that it's never enough. (Male academic, Science)

Participants described the physical and psychological impacts of overwork, such as anxiety, depression, stress, muscular pain, and headaches:

I was completely worn out at the beginning of this year. I even wanted to quit teaching, but fortunately, I started therapy with a psychologist, and today I have a much better quality of life. I managed to establish some limits that seemed impossible, such as not working at weekends. I adjusted my work schedule, which was extremely positive, but I couldn't have done it on my own. (Female academic, Science)

My professional life tramples on my personal life for 10 months. During this period, all health projects, such as weight-loss diets, meditation, relaxation, etc. are abandoned. At the end of each semester, I am exhausted. (Female academic, Humanities)

There is also a pattern that demonstrates the internalisation of guilt for their working conditions and their failure to meet the existing demands:

I don't feel like doing anything, neither on holidays nor during work periods. I do it out of obligation. (...) It takes me five hours to get out of bed. I would have time to do everything I need to do if I had the strength to start. (Female academic, Exact and Earth Sciences)

Some lecturers associate their difficulties with switching off to a culture of productivity, which obliges them to 'publish or perish' in the academy:

At any opportunity, at any time, holidays or not, I work for the university, especially on the bureaucracy and the systematisation of processes. Production is required, but its quantity and not the quality of the production and in the hours of work and activity, orientations, assistance to students, dedication to studies, such as careful and critical reading, research of references and sources, analysis of information, these are not counted as hours of teaching activity. It is expected that the production comes from the few hours dedicated to research per week, without time for reading and studying sources... So, this needs to be done on weekends and holidays! (Female, Social Science)

Resistance strategies

The final theme explored evidence that lecturers are actively engaged in resistance practices against the excessive academy demands, trying (and sometimes succeeding) to find different ways of maintaining life and identity separate from their work. The majority of these are participants who previously described having a permeable boundary or no boundaries between professional and personal lives, but have changed their perspective for different reasons. Motivations for seeking a stronger work-life boundary were often related to a change in their priorities caused by health issues, their professional experiences, or family changes, such as marriage or having children:

I have a one-year-old son and the time I am not working I devote to him and my wife. They are my rest. (Male academic, Social Sciences)
My holiday period is for holidays. My weekend is for the weekends. I don't take work home. I leave everything in my office, at work. Work stays at the University, especially because I had two pregnancies in two years, I have two little girls at home and, therefore, even if I wanted to work, I couldn't. (Female academic, Health Science)

Some of these participants had already established a strong boundary between work and life, although most described struggling to maintain it. What they have in common is a strong resolve to establish and maintain the boundary over the long term, which requires self-management to achieve. Learning to say no and walking away from unfinished work was an active process of self-discipline:

I've done that too often, now I'm starting to police myself so that it doesn't happen anymore. (Female academic, Multidisciplinary)

A frequently cited strategy was the use of physical distance to maintain boundaries during leave periods. Travelling for holidays was a means of avoiding work and associated guilt, with several participants using the expression 'holidays are sacred' to describe their commitment to creating work-free time and space for the benefit of themselves and their families.

DISCUSSION

In this section, we situate the themes in relation to the key theoretical reference points and international research on the nature of academic work.

Complexity of tasks and environment: Multitasking and hyperattention

Multitasking can be defined as ‘the performance of more than one task in parallel or in rapid transition’ (Alkahtani et al., 2016, p. 995). In his essay on the ‘achievement society’, Han (2015) draws parallels between contemporary workers and prey animals in the wild, who must be constantly aware of the environmental demands and threats around them. As in the wild, multitasking is a matter of ‘survival’ for lecturers in our study, juggling complex tasks in the context of a hostile political and economic environment (Campos et al., 2020).

Yet, for Han, this ‘hyperattentive’ state comes with a cost: it fragments attention and prevents deeper engagement with tasks, especially those that require concentration, creativity, and time. This interpretation explains why participants reported that the university is not a space for intellectual production, with many preferring to save this task for other spaces and times of their daily lives, entering family and leisure time, and negatively impacting their quality of life (Campos et al., 2020; Matos, Sharp & Iaochite, 2022). In addition, research has shown that multitasking can lead to increased stress levels, decreased productivity, lower overall well-being, and poor self-regulation and efficacy (Alkahtani et al., 2016).

This situation may be further exacerbated by the need to perform multiple roles (researcher, teacher, manager, and administrator) without adequate support or preparation. During postgraduate studies, the main recruitment criterion in Brazilian universities, the candidate receives research training through doctoral studies. Consequently, academics may feel they lack the necessary skills to meet these demands. Research suggests that increased bureaucratic/administrative tasks are associated with a decrease in lecturers’ sense of agency, undermining their autonomy over their work (Laiho et al., 2022; Martinez & Pepler, 2000). A diminishing sense of agency and self-efficacy can contribute to a sense of overwhelm and, in turn, a decrease in productivity, further exacerbating work-related stress (Matos, Iaochite & Sharp, 2022).

Numerous participants’ comments described the demands of their role as overwhelming, linking their overwork practices to a sense that their formal work time ‘never seems enough.’ Coser’s (1974) concept of ‘greedy institutions’, which create such excessive demands on their members’ time that their ability to engage with life outside is eroded, has been applied to academic institutions (Sullivan, 2013).

This study provides clear evidence that Brazilian universities are also characterised by these patterns of excessive demand, and that lecturers are at risk of feeling helpless to resist them, given the wider economic and political context in which they operate. However, if lecturers perceive that the need for multitasking and overwork arises from these external sources, without recognising how they internalise those demands, their sense of agency may be diminished, removing incentives to regulate their behaviour and resist excessive work demands (Cravens et al., 2022).

The results also demonstrate that work overload can be exacerbated when individuals perceive their profession as a sacred duty and a key part of their identity. The tight schedule and the long work hours can be seen as a privilege and a choice, an intrinsic part of academic life, rather than an unnecessary risk to one’s work quality, mental, and physical health. This may also diminish an individual’s sense of agency and motivation to create positive changes to support better work-life balance.

Excessive dedication: The nature and meaning of academic work

Ideas about vocation and identity were important to participants' meaning-making and to the justification of their work practices, as seen in the themes 'excessive dedication' and 'strategies of adaptation'. The development of identity can be defined as 'an ongoing process of interpretation and re-interpretation of whom one considers oneself to be and whom one would like to become' (Van Lankveld et al., 2016, p. 326); it is built in a social context, being dynamic rather than static. Academic identity is composed of idealisations of what is supposed to be an academic, including expectations about ideal pedagogical, scholarly, and research capabilities (Gabriel, 2010).

The idea of academic work as a vocation is often cited as a justification for intense work demands. Teaching at all levels is a profession characterised as a vocation. Considering university teaching as a mission or vocation has several pivotal implications.

An occupation is the work in which a person is employed. A vocation is a summons or strong inclination to a particular course or of action, especially a divine call to the religious life ... a vocation referred to the way one lives in response to God's call, so while you can leave an occupation, a vocation is forever. (Ettarh & Vidas, 2022, p. 19)

Thus, if university teaching is understood as a vocation, it can be assumed that an inner force compels the lecturer to teach, a calling that is more important than the lecturer themselves. One could question the implications of this assumption for lecturers' health and quality of life, which should therefore be put on hold after the work demands. The evidence from this study highlights that this perception can lead to overwork.

Moreover, participants understood that intellectual work could be an intrinsic motivator for lecturers. While some university work can be pleasurable, it is important to understand that the work conditions in which this labour is undertaken are equally important. With changes in universities over recent decades, including managerial measures such as quality assessments and production standards, working in academia could be considered a 'bittersweet symphony' due to the ambivalence between its positive and negative aspects (Knight & Clark, 2014). Since, as Han (2015) remarks, individuals are compelled to work for pleasure rather than duty, the drive for constant growth means that an individual will never feel that they have achieved their goals and lecturers must be aware of this risk. In the next section, the implications for the lecturers' health are discussed.

The personal costs of 'greedy institutions' and adaptation strategies

In Han's vision of the achievement society, individuals are inculcated with the illusion that greater activity means greater freedom, and hyper-productivity becomes an internalised goal. The need for rest is not recognised since 'machines cannot pause' (Han, 2015, p. 22). However, humans are not machines, and health challenges and bodily limitations affect everyone at some point in their lives (Davis, 2002). Data from this analysis illustrate how respondents' health and well-being are affected by the demands of their university's achievement culture.

Morrish (2009) suggested that there is an epidemic of poor mental health among university staff in the United Kingdom, linked to a toxic culture in which excessive workloads and dedication to duty are shaped by a culture driven by performance metrics. While a concern with metrics was not consistently evident in this data, excessive workloads and a demand that Han termed 'hyperactivity' were. Respondents described the demands of the university and how these encroached on their personal and leisure time, rendering the boundary between personal and professional permeable.

A range of demands was described as persistent, excessive, and coming at all times of the day and during vacations. One commonly cited factor was the increasing prevalence of digital technology and social media for communication, which appeared to facilitate the leakage of professional demands into family hours. These demands left some feeling drained and unable to prioritise their own health and well-being.

Academia has been characterised as an ‘anxiety machine’ (Hall & Bowles, 2016, p. 33), a professional culture that pushes staff to internalise demands for productivity and availability over their own health. Directly linking work demands to feelings of stress and exhaustion was common across respondents' comments. Participants reported feeling unable to take their vacations due to excessive workload, as shown in the results section. When people were forced to take time off, for example, due to illness, a sense of guilt was evident, suggesting that the notion of auto-aggression or ‘destructive self-reproach’ (Han, 2015, p. 11) was experienced by some respondents, as mentioned in the results. Some lecturers attribute their poor performance to themselves, without recognising the context in which they operate or the impossibility of meeting expectations. Thus, the person internalises their guilt for not meeting the extrinsically established productivity criteria, which became a personal standard for self-evaluation and can generate discomfort and illness.

This development of guilt towards their work and the questioning of their capabilities to work was explored by Han (2019, p. 9) when the author stated that in a psychopolitical society, ‘although the achievement-subject deems itself free, in reality, it is a slave. In so far as it willingly exploits itself without a master, it is an absolute slave. There is no master forcing the achievement-subject to work’. Hence, even if the person did not have external pressures to produce in the universities, they would still face internal impossible standards leading us to exhaustion and self-blaming due to our ‘limitless potential’ (Knight & Clark, 2014).

In this sense, being a lecturer in Brazil still carries a higher social status than working at other levels of education, with better financial compensation. Therefore, one can observe the lack of separation between working and private life with the identification of a responsibility to ‘give back’ to the community. At its limits, this perception could lead to just accepting working conditions as ‘fair enough’ relative to other less advantaged social groups and feeding guilty feelings about poor performance.

However, there is also evidence that the experience of physical or mental health challenges could trigger critical reflection. Respondents shared stories of how health crises led them to take steps to make their work-life boundaries less permeable, to prioritise their health without guilt, and to seek support and tools to make long-term changes to their relationship with work.

Although Han (2015, 2019) gives little indication of how one might resist the achievement society, he emphasises the importance of pausing and interrupting, and the power to say no. Given the role of health challenges as sources of interruption, these experiences could alter respondents' perspectives and priorities. In the next section, we discuss the strategies that individual lecturers use to adapt to universities' requirements and analyse their potential for collective adoption.

Strategies for resisting the achievement society

Some respondents resisted to the work pressure because they ideologically disagreed with the idea of having no space for a personal life and the constant need to produce. However, most of them were motivated by a change in circumstances that produced an equally demanding commitment or forced a reappraisal of priorities. In addition to mental and physical health challenges, commonly cited motivators for a change, family commitments also provided a reason for work-life balance.

As previously discussed, many respondents were aware of the risks of overwork and unrealistic expectations in their jobs but struggled to maintain a firm boundary between their professional and personal domains. If ‘vocational awe’ is a factor in the production of overwork and excessive commitment (Ettarh & Vidas, 2022), for these academics, there was also ample evidence of awareness of both the negative effects of overwork and attempts at resistance. The specific strategies were clear in the comments. Respondents developed these strategies to maintain a sense of non-academic identity and reduce excessive demands on time and attention. Metaphors of battle, ‘invasion’ and evidence of intense self-management were common, demonstrating an active process. For instance, respondents referred to the need for self-discipline to separate work commitments and their wider lives.

This resistance to allowing work into their personal lives could have professional consequences for those who choose to defend their personal time from intrusion. Some mentioned that it generates a sense of guilt, in addition to leading to social constraints and discrimination. As one respondent put it: 'I pay a professional price for this [choice]' (Female, Life Sciences). Negative perceptions and poor treatment by colleagues, along with less favourable career prospects, were the main consequences reported by participants. Given the overall tendency of respondents to use leisure time for career-enhancing activities, such as conferences and producing research papers, those who tried to maintain work-life separation accepted lower productivity (in terms of research outputs) as an inevitable outcome of that decision.

The idea that care, whether of oneself or family members, disrupts normative academic culture is supported by other studies. The concept of the university as a 'care-less' organisation (Lynch, 2010; Moreau, 2016) is not new, and this study reveals the ways in which the 'hidden gendered doxa of carelessness' (Ivancheva et al., 2019, p. 452), in which the 'ideal' academic is extremely productive and unencumbered by responsibilities outside of academia (Sang et al., 2015), operates within Brazilian higher education. This was illustrated by one respondent who said: 'In the first year I heard from the academic director of my unit that 'a teacher who takes holidays is not a real teacher, that holidays are for working' (Female academic, Engineering). However, those who tried to adapt to all universities' demands reported that it can lead to annoyances and worsen their health (Matos, Sharp & Iaochite, 2022; Santos et al., 2016), reduce the time for intellectual production and work overload, and increase competition among the collegiate rather than promoting collaborative work (Bosi, 2007; Skea, 2021).

Many respondents were actively working to separate their academic and non-academic lives and identities despite the struggles and negative consequences that often accompany this work, offering a narrative counterpoint to Han's bleak assessment of the internal machinery of the achievement society. The notion of holidays as sacred, a sentiment repeated frequently by respondents, demonstrates that academic workers can and do find value, both personal and professional, in rest, leisure, and family time at the individual level.

The participants also pointed out in their answers that they use different self-regulatory and time-management strategies that have helped them deal with the demands of teaching in universities. Although these individual initiatives helped lecturers adapt to the environment, cope with challenges, and improve their well-being, more than individual issues, they represent systemic constraints that must be addressed by universities and Higher Education as a whole. The participant's quote shows a path when she states that 'I organize myself with the lecturers in my area, one helping the other' (Female, Health Science). This collegiality exercise seems to be a clue for future group initiatives.

In this sense, as Skea (2021) pointed out, productivism and competition at the university also need to make space for a vision of community that promotes relationships for the development and sharing of ideas and projects, favouring the dialogue, space, and creativity necessary for intellectual work. Initiatives of this nature may help challenge productivism standards.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Our findings should be interpreted in the light of several limitations. First, as the survey question could be considered leading, acquiescence bias is a possibility. Potential bias in participants' self-selection might exist, as individuals using personal space for work are more likely to respond due to a sense of resonance with the topic.

Data were collected before the COVID-19 pandemic, which certainly affected the university environment and lecturers' work-life balance. This scenario could be explored in future studies, which could help understand the implications of the pandemic on lecturers' work demands.

In addition, the data were collected at the end of the semester in Brazil, a busier period of the year, marked by tests and grading, which could have affected lecturers' perceptions of tiredness. Therefore, longitudinal studies could be conducted to understand if and how lecturers' perceptions

change over the course of the year. This could lead universities to develop specific strategies for busier times, such as hiring additional staff for those periods or changing other requirements deadlines.

CONCLUSION

This article explored Brazilian lecturers' perceptions of the erosion of boundaries between their professional and personal lives. While the phenomenon of blurred work-life boundaries is well-documented globally, this study contributes to the literature by offering a novel interpretation of qualitative data through the theoretical lenses of Byung-Chul Han's 'achievement society' and Lewis Coser's 'greedy institutions.' These frameworks offer a unique perspective on how academic demands are internalised and resisted, particularly in contexts where institutional pressures and self-exploitation intersect. By applying these theories to the experiences of Brazilian lecturers, this study uncovers nuanced insights into how academics navigate the tensions between productivity, personal well-being, and institutional expectations.

Although the concept of greedy institutions has been applied to universities before, for example in the U.S. (Wright et al., 2004) and Australia (Currie et al, 2000), these typically understand poor work-life balance as a direct result of institutions leveraging their power over their workers, exploiting the academics' vocational work ethic to increase their control over the workforce whilst offering little reward (Rogler, 2019). Combining the concept of greedy institutions with Han's theory of the burnout-society and its 'achievement-subjects' extends our understanding and appreciation of this complex and important phenomenon. This conceptual framework enables us to see that individuals willingly submit to the grasp of the greedy institution are not merely passive victims of exploitation but actively engage in a reflexive process of self-exploitation. Through the dual forces of institutional greed and personal overcommitment to work, the neoliberalisation of Brazilian higher education has progressed rapidly, and the dangers to worker welfare are obvious and alarming.

Integrating Han's and Coser's works also enables a deeper understanding of how academic identities are shaped by both external demands and internalised norms of overwork. This approach enriches global discourse on WLB and highlights the potential of these theoretical frameworks to provide new insights across diverse academic contexts. Thus, the main contribution of this article lies in its reinterpretation of familiar challenges—such as work overload and blurred boundaries—through a fresh theoretical perspective, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities of academic life.

The use of a qualitative methodology, which explores participants' responses and gives voice to their anguish and perceptions, represents another contribution and adds depth to the understanding of work-life balance in academia. While qualitative studies on this topic are not uncommon, this work stands out for its large number of participants drawn from all Brazilian regions. The combination of qualitative insights with a large and nationally representative sample strengthens the study's contribution to the literature, offering both depth and breadth in its analysis.

Answering the question that entitles this paper, 'Holidays are Holidays, right?', posed by many participants, it seems that, for many Brazilian lecturers, holidays are anything but a time of leisure and rest. They are used mainly to fulfil delayed duties and the development of research activities, particularly writing and submitting papers, in addition to correcting dissertations and theses.

While writing this article, we saw a social media joke about the supposed flexibility of academic work. 'In academia, you work 18 hours a day. But you can work ANY 18 hours of the day that you want.' (Betz, 2022). Although prosaic, the anecdote reveals one of the great fallacies about the university environment: behind the proclaimed flexibility hides excessive demands and a multiplicity of roles that challenge lecturers daily, as seen throughout this article.

Long working hours, pressure to be productive in research and teaching, untimely demands, excessive bureaucracy, and, more recently, professional instability are common issues in lecturers' lives. This article aimed to be a part of the growing body of research investigating the relationships between

lecturers' professional demands and their quality of life and health, a subject of interest, particularly following the COVID-2019 pandemic, which further blurred the boundaries between personal and professional space.

After analysing the results, we argue that these issues require a broad perspective, based on the assumption that they arise and develop within a societal context rather than from individual psychological factors. Laiho et al. (2022) pointed out a tendency to portray collective problems in Higher Education as individual issues. In this sense, Han (2015, 2019) highlighted the individualisation of collective issues as a *modus operandi* in an achievement society. If contextual and social problems are labelled as individual issues, collective action becomes difficult, or even impossible. Accordingly, in some participants' claims, one can observe the accountability of lectures for their perceptions of work and, consequently, their (poor) health. The main problem with this type of causal attribution is that, if the problem is individual, there is no need for collective action to change. However, the literature states that overload and health issues are plaguing academics worldwide and require a collective, purposeful solution.

One possible solution is to call on universities to take action and incorporate health into their practices and policies, considering these institutions as a propitious space for health dissemination. In this sense, since 2003 the "Health promoting universities", portrayed by the World Health Organization, have been defined as universities whose "educational and work project includes the promotion of health to improve the quality of life of its members through healthy human development, relying on the modelling and disseminating role of its members" (Bravo-Valenzuela et al., 2013, p. 467). Following the Edmonton and, more recently, the Okanagan Charters, universities around the world have been implementing diverse initiatives focused on health promotion policies that include not only staff and students but also their surrounding communities.

In Brazil, the concept of "health-promoting universities" is still in development (Faria et al., 2021). So far, the initiatives have mainly been isolated, focused on specific health promotion activities: flu vaccination campaigns, periodic medical examinations for staff, anti-smoking campaigns, sporadic sports activities, and others, depending on the degree courses in each unit. Although these initiatives are important, the main point is that the idea of building a healthy, health-promoting community is still distant.

As this research shows, many lecturers still struggle to maintain their own health due to constraints in the HE context. Therefore, developing universities that could truly be labelled "health-promoting universities" requires a commitment to the political and social efforts needed for universities to promote a supportive work environment, implementing cultural changes to challenge the discourses of over-work and exhaustion (Skea, 2021) and defy the neoliberal context that permeates work in universities today. Building universities that promote health for their entire academic community, enabling them to change their living ecosystems and improve their health, must be a target for Brazilian universities as part of their institutional projects over the next few years. As the results show, although individual changes help lecturers live better, few can make them alone in an environment that does not favour collective activities. Nevertheless, on an individual level, we stress that for lecturers in HE, prioritising their own health and well-being is not a luxury but a necessity, as it enables them to preserve themselves and continue fighting systemic challenges in academia.

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The content underlying the research text is contained in the manuscript.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1: Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Author 2: Formal analysis, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

Author 3: Methodology, Formal analysis, Visualization, Writing – review & editing.

Author 4: Supervision, Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that the research had no commercial or financial relationships that could be considered as a potential conflict of interest.