

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Feminist Frontiers

An autoethnography of pregnancy and birth during Covid times: Transcending the illusion of overwork in academia?

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Abstract

Under the pressure of always increasing demands of publication, excessive working hours are widespread in academia. Based on an autoethnography of myself as a pregnant woman under Covid, I explore the extent of my being caught by the illusion—"being taken in and by the game" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), that prompted me to remain absorbed by the publishing game and to overwork until the very last day before giving birth to my son. I also explore how the forced deceleration induced by the maternity leave as well as the Covid confinement contributed to increased awareness and reflection thus helping me to transcend the illusion that prompted me to overwork. I also reflect to the extent of this conversion being reversible given the continued pressures of the academic context.

KEYWORDS

academia, autoethnography, illusion, overwork, resistance

1 | INTRODUCTION

Whereas research on worker exploitation has traditionally focused on manual low status service workers, there is an increasing awareness of the Taylorization of work and the spread of overwork among professional workers (Bunting, 2005; Karreman & Alvesson, 2009; Mazmanian et al., 2013; Michel, 2011; Robertson et al., 2003) and academia is no exception to this. Increasing commercial and competitive pressures of business school rankings as well as a myopic focus on research outputs and other measures of performance accountability have led to an intensification of work in academia (Clarke et al., 2012; Fleming, 2020; Gendron, 2015; Knights & Clarke, 2014). These studies point

to how academics internalize these pressures and by complying with the rules of the game further increase their alienation and identity insecurity (Clarke et al., 2012; Knights & Clarke, 2014).

Previous research suggests that compliance with extreme working hours in organizations is a result of socialization and exposure to organizational discourses about merit and an integral part of professional identity (Anderson-Gough et al., 2000, 2001; Coffey, 1994; Grey, 1998). Nevertheless, as more recent research acknowledges, in spite of strong pressures toward conformity, employees have the means to resist and negotiate power relations instituted through discourses (Courpasson et al., 2012; Halford & Leonard, 2006; Meriläinen et al., 2004; Symon, 2005; Thomas & Davies, 2005), even though resisting is not easy and there are often associated penalties (Lupu et al., 2020; Reid, 2015; Ruiz Castro, 2012). With few exceptions (Michel, 2011), previous research has not inquired into the circumstances that enable professionals to transcend socialization and thus resist to the urge to overwork by mobilizing an embodied experience, such as I intend to do in the present study.

Through an autoethnography of pregnancy and giving birth under Covid, I first explore the extent of my being caught in the game of publishing and complying with the academic publication requirements. Then, I share my experience of giving birth and nursing under Covid as well as how these experiences forced me to stop working and thinking about research. This allowed me to de-normalize and relativize long working hours and the publication pressures. It also enabled me to shift the institutional definition of an “ideal academic”, primarily defined as somebody who gets published in top (US-centered) journals (Lund, 2012) toward somebody who is a rounded individual, with both academic ambitions and family involvement.

The Business Schools academic field is arguably a field with a strong *illusio*, a concept describing “being taken in and by the game” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), which covers the fact that many academics, in spite of their professed disinterestedness in material rewards and a commitment to professional autonomy (Lupu & Empson, 2015), are enmeshed in a paying-off mentality of short-term material and reputational benefits and rewards (Gendron, 2015). We are ‘inebriated’ by our own abstract ideas and political/networking games to such an extent as to ignore that our research is becoming sterile and disconnected from organizational practice (Post et al., 2020). Escaping the *illusio* of the academic field is thus a continuous struggle to search for and to re-assert the meaning and purpose of our work.

This study seeks to contribute to two bodies of literature. First, it expands the literature examining why and how knowledge workers resist to extreme work conditions by providing an embodied perspective on resistance. Second, by highlighting and operationalizing the concept of *illusio*—the strong investment that people with a compatible habitus with the field show for the game and stakes of that field, this paper aims to contribute to the literature questioning the increasing commercialization and performance pressures in Business Schools (Bothello & Roulet, 2019; Clarke et al., 2012; Fleming, 2020) promoted by a fetishization of journal rankings (Willmott, 2011).

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. First, I provide an overview of the research on long hours in academia and beyond. Second, I introduce a conceptual framework that draws on Bourdieu's concept of *illusio* which prompted me to focus on playing the publishing game at the expense of my family life. Third, I highlight how my pregnancy and subsequent birth of my son in the context of the current sanitary crisis helped me to transcend the *illusio* which prompted me to overwork. Finally, I conclude by reflecting on the contributions of the present article.

2 | LONG WORKING HOURS AND RESISTANCE IN ACADEMIA

Previous literature has noted that long working hours and time investment is a widespread practice in knowledge organizations, such as business schools, where people are expected to be continuously available (Fletcher et al., 2007; Knights & Clarke, 2014; Lupu et al., 2020; Ruiz Castro, 2012). In these organizations, professional identity is constructed with reference to an ideal worker (academic), defined as “someone who gives total priority to work and has no outside interests and responsibilities” (Bailyn, 2003, p. 139). Moreover, academics can never feel secure about their competence in as much as the ideal academic identity remains unattainable “because the real or imagined demands

of others invariably exceed the capacity of ordinary human beings to meet them” (Knights & Willmott, 1999, p. 72). These norms appear as clearly gendered and puts people with caring responsibilities, usually women, at a disadvantage (Fletcher et al., 2007).

Previous studies attribute the intensification of work in academia to the increasing commercial and competitive pressures of business school rankings and the increasing pressure schools' management place upon academics toward publishing more and more papers in higher ranked journals (Fleming, 2020; Gendron, 2015; Knights & Clarke, 2014). Moreover, their (our) compliance with the value scale enshrined by journal rankings stifle diversity and constrict scholarly innovation (Gendron, 2015; Willmott, 2011).

Although many studies focus on workers' compliance with organizational norms, some studies indicate that dis-identification practices can take different forms: *active*—criticizing, negotiating, challenging, game playing (Hawkins, 2008), *passive*—distancing, cynicism (Fleming & Spicer, 2003; Kosmala & Herrbach, 2006). Some of these forms of resistance were criticized for functioning rather as coping strategies with institutional demands, not as material resistance (Karreman & Alvesson, 2009). The fact is that employees perform as expected, even if they do not agree with organizational values and norms, leaving the status quo intact. For as much as employees might question the status quo by dis-identifying with cultural prescriptions or making fun of organizational situations, they still act “as if they believe in the culture of the organization” (Fleming and Spicer, 2003, p. 169). Prior studies point to how academics themselves internalize these pressures and by complying with the rules of the game fail to resist to the oppressive demands for audit, accountability and performance (Boncori & Smith, 2019; Clarke et al., 2012). A more recent and growing stream of research exploring typically feminine, embodied experiences such as pregnancy or motherhood (Boncori & Smith, 2019; Cohen et al., 2009; Gatrell, 2013; Herr & Wolfram, 2012; Huopainen & Satama, 2019; Strauß & Boncori, 2020) show how professional navigate and sometimes resist the masculine culture of their workplaces. For instance, miscarriage and the subsequent sharing of this intimate experience as an example of alternative writing can be used to challenge and resist dominant masculine discourse in academia (Boncori & Smith, 2019). Another paper shows how women early career academics resisted dominant discourses by taking their babies with them to informal meetings at the university (Huopainen & Satama, 2019).

The present article adds to this stream of research by exploring how women academics resist socialization and “ideal academic” discourses through embodied experiences, an area still underexplored. Specifically, drawing on the Bourdieusian concept of *illusio* (which I present in the following), this paper explores my own experiences of giving birth and nursing a baby and how this helped me to transcend the ingrained socialization into long hours and private life sacrifice which used to characterize my professional self.

3 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: ILLUSIO IN ACADEMIA

Illusio is a key concept in Bourdieu's sociology (Golsorkhi & Huault, 2006) but has been neglected in organizational studies in favor of more popular concepts, such as field, habitus, and capital. Bourdieu's last works, *Practical Reason* and *Pascalian Meditations*, make systematic use of *illusio*, which synthesizes numerous concepts, such as interest, investment, engagement, and libido, and completes his theory of action.

Illusio governs fields - semi-autonomous arena characterized by specific rules and action logics (Bourdieu, 1998), and the game metaphor describes how fields function: both have rules that participants respect and represent constraints as well as resources for action. Players, who have different positions within the field based on the volume and structure of their capital, struggle to acquire different types of capital which are valued in the field.

The academic field arguably has a strong *illusio* which can be seen as manifesting itself as professed disinterest in material rewards and a commitment to professional autonomy to pursue one's own intellectual agenda. Performance metrics, journal rankings have reinforced the *illusio* of the field by “the tendency to assess researchers on the basis of their ‘hits’ instead of the substance of their work” (Gendron, 2008), thus making some research sterile and with little social relevance. The outcome has been to create a disincentive to innovate and has increased conformity

and superficiality in academic publishing. As Gendron (2008), p. 99 argues in his study of academics “terror is notably sustained through social practices which stigmatize those who fail to perform as “losers”. Illusio speaks about the meaning academics find in a process that to most outsiders appears as absurd and sterile (Lupu & Empson, 2015).

Illusio has three main connotations in Bourdieu's work: investment, interest in the game and principle of perception. First, illusio is a way of “being in the world” (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 135) characterized by one's *investment* (the opposite of indifference) that arises from being a product of that particular world. It means to be “taken in and by the game” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 116) and it represents a psychological as well as a corporeal investment. As such, it differentiates those whose habitus embody the field from the outsiders who do not. Second, illusio can be understood as *interest in the game*, which Bourdieu explains as: “games which matter to you are important and interesting because they have been imposed and introduced in your mind, in your body, in a form called the feel for the game” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 77). Third, illusio is a *principle of perception*: it is that which is perceived as obvious and normal for an actor within a field, but appears as illusion to those outside the field. This experience is linked to one's belief in the stakes of the game which translates into a refusal to question its underlying principles. So illusio is at the same time investment, interest and principle of perception. It is a condition for the operation of fields.

Illusio most powerfully affects the best of the players, those whose habitus embodies the field. Thus, a compatible habitus can be socialized and does not oppose resistance. The compliant undergo a clear norm internalization process of values and behaviors specific to the organizational and professional culture, which transforms newcomers into professionals—masters of the game.

Habitus is acquired through socialization and repetition, and through this process, the agent involved in a field develops its mental structures. Gradually, progressively, and imperceptibly, the agent's original habitus is converted through a more or less radical process (depending on the distance) into the specific habitus required for entry into the game (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 11). Illusio can exert a strong hold on agents because it targets not the reflexive mind but the practical consciousness (Giddens, 1984), or the unconscious component of the habitus:

The illusio is ... of the order of action, routine, of things that we do, and that we do because they are done and have always been done in this way. (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 122–123)

There are two concrete/practical manifestations of illusio: first, a belief in the stakes of the game and engagement in the field, and second, competence/feel for the game and knowledge of the specific rules of the game. Once in a field, agents feel a strong compulsion to play the game, without intending to become absorbed by it. However, as conscious reflexivity can create or alter internalized dispositions, there is hope that people can break away from the illusio.

4 | TRANSCENDING ILLUSIO

As Bourdieu notes, moments of crises by breaking the illusio constitute windows of opportunity by increasing awareness and individuals' capacity to question beliefs they used to take-for-granted:

Times of crises, in which the routine adjustment of subjective and objective structures is brutally disrupted, constitute a class of circumstances when indeed “rational choice” may take over, at least among those agents who are in a position to be rational. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 131)

In a more general way, habitus has its “blips”, critical moments when it misfires or is out of phase: the relationship of immediate adaptation is suspended (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 162)

The two above quotes seem to describe two moments of a situation that encourages conscious reflection. “Blips” in the operation of the habitus—occasions when it leads to actions that do not have the expected or desired effect

and crises—are possible causes of a mismatch between the habitus and its objective environment. Individuals may be thrown into a radically new situation by external factors—pregnancy and Covid crisis, for example—or may face a similarly unfamiliar situation as a result of moving voluntarily into a new field—e.g. getting out of academia. Such mismatches, gaps between expectation and experience, tend to generate not only a need for conscious deliberation but also a need for modifications to the habitus itself (Bourdieu, 2000:149). However, as Bourdieu warns, transcending *illulio* is difficult to achieve, as it is deeply rooted in taken-for-granted beliefs and routines as well as enforced by institutional attachments, so it cannot be dispelled by consciousness raising alone:

Will and consciousness alone will not overcome these effects—the very body can respond with timidity or ‘paralyzing taboos’, feelings of duty, devotion and past loyalties. (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 180)

Tacit beliefs play an important part, so it is only by means of deconstructing them through ‘a thoroughgoing process of countertraining, involving repeated exercises, can, like an athlete’s training, durably transform habitus’ (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 172).

5 | AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AS A RESEARCH METHOD

Autoethnographies are highly personal texts in which researchers make sense of the surrounding world and their personal experiences while engaging in high levels of reflexivity about the research process and their own place in it (Haynes, 2006). I adopted a specialized form of autoethnography, the personal narrative (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), where researchers “take on the dual identities of academic and personal selves to tell autobiographical stories about some aspect of their experience in daily life.” (p. 740)

Given the formatted nature of academic writing, where the researcher is supposed to adopt an “objective” posture and erase herself from the research process (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Empson, 2013), a demand taken to the extreme in some top-level mainstream journals (Boncori & Smith, 2019), I have seldom had the opportunity in my academic career to perform this kind of exercise centered on my identity and subjectivity. In fact, I found this exercise quite difficult as my thinking and writing have been molded by the years of being hammered into me that a good article should have a clearly (preferably three-folded) theoretical contribution, a systematic literature review, a discussion section, etc. So, I struggled to liberate my writing, which is probably quite visible in the end result.

While autoethnography has long been used in anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies (e.g. Ellis, 2007; Reed-Danahay, 2009), it has still been relatively little used in management and organization studies to explore academic careers (Ruiz Castro, forthcoming). Some exceptions include recent ethnographies specifically in academic careers, such as dealing with work-home dynamics (Cohen et al., 2009), or in relation to embodied experiences such as motherhood and pregnancy (Huopalaian & Satama, 2019), miscarriage (Boncori & Smith, 2019), and fertility treatment (Griffiths, 2021).

Yet, the value of autoethnographic inquiry lays in exploring multiple layers of consciousness and multiple selves (Boje & Tyler, 2008). According to Ellis and Bochner (2000), writing an autoethnography starts with writing about one’s life, emotions and introspection in order to understand the experiences one has gone through. Autoethnography thus allows researchers to connect their everyday organizational experiences with a wider cultural, social, political and organizational context (Ruiz Castro, forthcoming). A reflexive use of ethnographic material encourages researchers to use memories and recollections to construct stories as close as possible to the remembered experience (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Reflexivity urges researchers to question or interrogate, not only the underlying assumptions of others or specific situations, but also the truth claims we make about ourselves (Cunliffe, 2003). By exploring and writing my life up, I hope to understand more about a way of life - life in academia, and a context-Covid era.

The data I use to develop my account draws from three main sources: my research notes, my personal diary and personal recollections 6 to 10 months after the main period which makes the object of my study, that is roughly the

first period of Covid-related lockdown in France (March-June 2020). This period also overlaps with my 16 weeks of statutory paid maternity leave.

I do not suggest that my autoethnography gives a complete, objective picture of this period or my experiences, nor that this endeavor would be possible by using a different research method. I am aware that “there is a limit to what the ‘I’ can actually recount” (Butler, 2005, p. 66). Thus, according to Butler, there is a part of ourselves that remains inaccessible despite our sincerity and willingness to tell the story of the self. It is precisely the personal history, this unique exposure to the social world (in my case, being a White, middle-class, East-European, heterosexual woman etc.), which together with our early relationships, forever locked in the pre-consciousness, can never be told. They constitute what might be called the blind spot of our identity.

6 | MY PERSONAL NARRATIVE

I am an Associate Professor in a top French business school. During the last few years, my school has been transitioning toward a performance driven system focused on publishing in top-tier US journals in an attempt to compete with the best business schools in Europe and the world.

Beginning of February 2020, I went on maternity leave with my second child. In France, the statutory paid maternity leave is 16 weeks and there is a legal requirement for women to take at least six weeks of maternity leave before the due date. This can be reduced to four weeks if the employer agrees, but my School did not agree saying that I need a paper from my gynecologist allowing me to continue to work. I felt in super form and wanted to continue working rather than putting my feet up. I did not bother with that as I knew I could continue working (mostly on research and course coordination) from home. However, I found this paternalistic, hypocritical pressure a bit annoying. Of course, everybody knew that I needed to continue working as nobody could replace me to coordinate my modules, to continue reviewing the papers I had accepted to review before my pregnancy, or to work on my ongoing papers together with my co-authors. I realize with hindsight that notwithstanding the existing pressures to continue working, I also needed to make myself believe in my own importance and irreplaceability.

In the weeks prior to my due date, my plan was to focus on my research. I had a paper under review in a top journal and a few months before I had received a second revise and resubmit which was qualified by the associate editor as high risk. I had waited this moment of deceleration of my other activities to be able to immerse myself in this paper which had been waiting on my desk for more than two months. The review process had been quite long, each time five months under review, but the reviews were constructive and beyond the immense quantity of work that I knew it needed to be done in order to answer their comments, I felt that I could do it. That gave me a sense of elation and I enthusiastically worked away at rearranging the pieces of the puzzle in order to build a more convincing story for the reviewers. Days went by one after the other and during that period almost all of my energy was focused on this task and I dealt with the different demands from school related to administrative or teaching-related tasks as background noise which brought unwanted interruptions.

Mid March, a couple of weeks after the start of my maternity leave, the news of the rapid spread of the Covid-19 virus managed to penetrate in my bubble and with very little notice teaching in all higher education around the country, my school included, went online. I was hearing all that in the distance, through a superficial monitoring of the exchanges. I sympathized with my colleagues that had stayed behind, but the whole thing seemed to me more like a film happening in the background. It did not feel real, it almost lacked substance, it was like the fake moving background in old movies.

My mother arrived as planned at the beginning of March to help me in the last month before the baby was due. Little did we imagine at that point the arrival of a pandemic and the closing down of country borders all over the world. Around mid-March, my husband started working from home. Schools were on holiday beginning of April, but they did not re-open after the holidays and we had to start home-schooling our six-years old daughter.

All through this time, I stayed focused on my research, working at least six hours per day, but often longer and also working during the weekends. My mum could not understand that although I was on maternity leave, I was still working so intensely. She kept telling me that I needed to move more that it was not healthy to spend so much time seated. I sat at my desk in the morning and I barely moved until dusk, focused as I was on my writing. I found myself completely absorbed in the struggle to finalize the paper and submit it before the baby was born. Baby's due date became my own, self-imposed submission due date. I had to submit the paper before he was born otherwise, I kept telling myself, I was not going to enjoy my maternity leave.

The baby was growing and moving inside me and even though I was happy thinking that I would welcome him in the world soon, I let my mind take control and preferred to think that this event was still distant and that I had enough time to prepare for it, even though my body was telling me something different. During the whole of my ninth month of pregnancy I was secretly summoning my baby to wait a bit longer and not to be born before the due date in order to give me enough time to finalize the paper and resubmit it.

My mind had to stay strong and in control of my body. Biology had to stay in check and be driven by the rhythm of academic work. Everything else could be put on the back burner, I was running against the ticking clock of my own body to finish the review. Everything else could wait and had to be delayed in order to allow myself for more time to work on the paper. The flow of adrenaline I felt while working sharpened my mind while it numbed my body. As Bourdieu notes, participation in the game is "visceral" and "unjustifiable" (especially to outsiders), even if it can be rationalized post-festum (Bourdieu, 1997: 122–123). The more you sacrifice to the game, the more the game becomes important to you, so while I was conscious at some level of the absurdity of the academic game, I found it difficult to not comply with it. I had sacrificed too much to this game in the last few years, first to obtain tenure, and then to comply to my school's exhortation to publish in top-tier journals even though I was lacking the resources in terms of training and network. However, I could not think from outside the game. I had become an embodiment of the academic game which played itself out through me, but often against me as overwork was damaging my relationships with my family who kept telling me that I was never there.

My co-author could not help much, he did not have the time to do it, between his School duties and his increased family responsibilities due to Covid. It did not matter, I was going to do everything by myself, I was a heavy lifter. As I was writing the reply to our reviewers, I tried not to think about the almost two years since the paper had been under review in that top journal and an average turnaround time (very long!) of five months for each round. I had conducted most of the interviews in 2015, so that meant almost five years in the making! Many of the people I interviewed had left those firms and some of the work-life balance policies had changed. I could not help asking myself how relevant were my findings after all this time? At that time, working from home was, for most of my participants, a relatively rare occurrence with only a handful of people who were trying to regularly work one day per week from home. On the contrary, as the Covid crisis was about to show, working from home was to become the new normal. However, these questionings remained marginal, and my mind chose to block them most of the time as I let myself obsessively pursue the illusory rewards of the game and completely adhered to its rules.

The Covid lockdown had sent everybody home and canceled academic conferences. I was secretly happy about this, as I was thinking that in this way my absence would be less noticed, and I would miss out less on networking at different academic events. This certainly alleviated my frustration of not being able to participate in events during the summer following the birth of my son and my fear of missing out. I had worked so hard to build a network and I irrationally feared that missing the opportunity to meet people one year would damage these efforts.

About two weeks before my due date, during the last medical check-up, I was told that because of Covid my husband will not be able to visit during my stay at the maternity unit. I had chosen that particular maternity unit because they were known for allowing dads to be around 24/7. Tears came down my eyes. That was not how I imagined my delivery and maternity ward stay to be. I wanted a time and space where my husband and I would be together with our new-born baby to form a strong bonding. Instead, I was going to be alone, I was having to deal alone with all this. It is then that I felt a superpower come over me and I knew I was going to handle it all. It was still my mind who attempted to stay in control of the unruly body. Years of academic socialization had taught me that in order to be an ideal academic, I

had to subdue my body—in front of the students and my colleagues I had to put forward an energetic, enthusiastic body even when I was feeling run down and sick.

By April 6th, the due date, when lockdown was in full swing, I had decided that I needed to deal alone with all this and in order to be able to do it, everything had to be as predictable as possible. I had decided that I was going to drive myself to the hospital and back (as my husband was not driving) and that I will spend as little time as possible at the maternity unit. I felt that I had to take full responsibility for the whole organization if I wanted things to be done as I wanted to.

The due date arrived, and as planned, I drove myself to the hospital accompanied by my husband to have a planned C-section. Things were very well organized and with the exception of everybody wearing masks, the personnel managed to create an ambiance of normality. I was however intrigued to observe the segregation of roles: the midwives were all females and the doctors/surgeons males. After the midwives prepared me for the surgery explaining again the whole procedure to me and running various tests, I was taken to the surgery room and taken in charge by three male doctors. They were friendly, but also coldly professional—for them it was just another surgical act and they were chatting away over me, as they were performing the anesthesia and the incision, sometimes completely ignoring me.

I could feel that they had a bit of difficulty to take the baby out. One of them asked me to push and I tried as best as I could though I could hardly feel my lower part. For what felt like enormously long seconds I could not hear anything... and I was afraid that something might be wrong with the baby. I felt a huge relief when I heard him crying. Immediately, they called a midwife, and she took the baby, wrapped him and brought him to me to see. He was so tiny and wrinkled and had a large red spot on his nose. I thought that he was not very beautiful, but in an intimate way, he felt very much mine. After a few moments, she took him to the next-door room where my husband was waiting, and I was told that I was to join them soon after.

When I arrived in the room, my husband was holding our son to his chest, skin to skin, wrapped in a warm blanket. He was so little and quiet with his half-open, foggy eyes. We spent a couple of hours together and I could also hold him close to my skin and I breastfed him. He was so tiny, and defenceless and my husband thought that he was just wonderful, a beautiful boy and he had tears in his eyes and I probably had too. We spent a couple of happy hours in our bubble, but then we had to part as the Covid regulations did not allow him to come into the area where the hospital rooms were. Baby in my arms I was wheeled down to the ward which was to be my home for the next few days and I never once parted with my son day or night for the next three days I remained at the hospital.

Days went by very fast, as I navigated my broken sleep, the disabling pain from the first 48 hours and as I subsequently started to use my feet and even managed to take a shower by myself in the afternoon of the second day. Reflecting later in my diary about these days, I was writing:

I felt a sort of liberation to just be, in the present, hour by hour, day by day. As if my mind always wanting to be in control of everything (my body included) was placing an unspeakable weight on myself to the point of feeling trapped by a mind which was playing against myself. All of a sudden it was quiet in my mind. My body and the baby, as an extension if it, suddenly took all available space and it was good.

This newly regained sense of my body, its reactions and needs were a way of learning about myself and who I really was. Suddenly, I had access to a part of myself which had been denied and almost suppressed for the last few months.

My husband came by in the evening to drop me some things, but was not allowed in. However, I could see him through the window, and we chatted for a little bit and I showed him our son.

The third day, I was feeling better and could walk easier though it was still painful to get up and out of bed and also to lay down. I had resolved that we would get out of hospital and go home the following day, on Thursday. For that to happen, my son's weight had to stabilize as he had been losing a bit of weight, within the normal limits, though, in the previous days. The color of his skin also had to become less yellow. For that to happen, he had to eat. I sang to him and held him to my breast the whole of last day and night. I was tired and my breasts were starting to hurt, but I kept whispering: "please baby, do eat to gain weight so that we are allowed to go home." We were both engaged in a race to get

quickly stronger so as to be discharged. My mind and my whole energy were focused on this aim. Covid had isolated me from my closed ones, but I was going to break this isolation and go back home to my family with my new baby. This purpose captured all my physical and mental energy.

Forgot was the crazy race to finalize the paper a few days before. And so engrossed was I by caring for my baby and getting better that I totally forgot about the paper and everything else related to my work. So much so, that almost two months later, I was surprised that my co-author still has not submitted the paper when I left him with what was supposedly a submittable paper. When he finally submitted it, I could not find in myself the anger to be mad about this delay.

During the first two-three months, the baby was feeding very often, I had less than two hours between feedings to eat, shower or do something else, but because each breastfeeding lasted at least one hour, I could read while breastfeeding. During these months, I read several novels and a couple of childrearing books, which I had not managed to do in years.

My mum was staying with us and my husband was working from home which meant that they could be around to help changing a nappy, keep an eye on the baby and help with home-schooling our older daughter. I was lucky to be so well surrounded and not having to care alone for a baby while the husband is away at work all day. This has always been my fear. The lockdown unexpectedly fixed this for me. Except for the reality outside, in my family cocoon, my dream had come true: spend time with my baby, surrounded by my close family. I felt I could let go and quiet my mind while letting my body become gradually more in charge.

However, at times, the organization was difficult, as my husband who was working in our dining room because we did not have a dedicated office space, complained that he could not work because of the constant noise and movement. Sometimes the stress of work was getting to him, but for the most part we were enjoying our time together. We were only allowed to go out around our house for one hour per day and as the parks were closed, we spent most of this time playing in the empty parking lot outside the apartment building where we lived.

The weather was mild in April and May and we took advantage even more than was allowed to be outside and walk around our house. The physical limits imposed by the Covid lockdown did not feel more overbearing than the physical limits imposed by my recovery. I wanted to be close to home and could not travel anyway. I was just quietly happy to be with my family and take comfort in our daily routines. I did not have the time or the energy to worry anymore about the paper, my career or anything else non-family related.

Was the *illusio* broken? Has the moment of rupture introduced by the miracle of welcoming a baby into the world managed to make me question the game and the sacrifices it required? I was writing in my diary in an entry end of June:

The paper and its publication passed from meaning everything to me to being almost nothing to me. It is as if I managed to cut myself lose from that part of myself which relentlessly, obsessively strategized about what paper to publish and where.

The experience of giving birth and the time off imposed by the maternity leave allowed me to stop for a moment the cogwheel and to step back and question my previous over-commitment to work as well as its place in my life. This experience constituted a shock which created a space of increased reflexivity. The embodied experience of giving birth and becoming a mother disrupted my absorption in work and made me question my previous commitment and sacrifice of my personal life. I think that the more I was successful in publishing, the more I got motivated to sacrifice other aspects of my life and the less I was inclined to seriously question its underlying principles. As Bourdieu notes, "*illusio* most powerfully affects people whose habitus is practically compatible [with the structures of the field], or sufficiently close, and above all malleable and capable of being converted into the required habitus, in short, congruent and docile, amenable to restructuring (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 100).

However, when I compare my work to what it means to have children and to educate them about the world, the returns from publishing my work are very low. The paper submitted to the top journal I mentioned earlier had been more than five years in the making for. Comparing that to raising a child, it is crazy to think that people like myself

invested so much time, to endlessly craft and re-craft theoretical contributions to persuade reviewers, only to be read by a handful of people. Is that a good use of my time and creative energy? How is that going to help to improve organizational practices, a task I had given myself at the start of my PhD research on gender inequality in professional firms?

My resistance started there and then by experiencing resistance to masculine norms of performance as incarnated. It was not anymore a vague questioning in the margins of my mind of the meaninglessness of the performance metrics and rankings, impact factors and hyper-performativity. I became acutely aware of being entrapped and this was unbearable to me to the point of making me sick. Though through the many years of learned socialization, my mind could be tricked into being oblivious of the obvious sterility of the neoliberal academic game, my body could not be tricked and thus became a site of knowing and ultimately of resistance.

7 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Based on an autoethnography of myself as a pregnant woman under Covid, I explore the extent of my being caught by the *illuio*—“being taken in and by the game” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), that prompted me to overwork until the very last day before giving birth to my son. I thus answer to calls to share our stories and expose our vulnerabilities in order to help others (Griffiths, 2021).

This article contributes to previous research in two ways. First, by highlighting and operationalizing the concept of *illuio*—the strong investment that people with a compatible *habitus* with the field show for the game and stakes of that field, this paper aims to contribute to the literature questioning the increasing commercialization and performance pressures in Business Schools (Bothello & Roulet, 2019; Clarke et al., 2012; Fleming, 2020) promoted by a fetishization of journal rankings (Willmott, 2011).

I explore *illuio* in its three forms: investment in the game, interest in the game and principle of perception. First, as an academic, I used to be totally invested in the academic game. Working on research often gave me a feeling of elation and I could feel the adrenaline flow in my veins. I was indeed taken in and by the game” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 116). Second, I had an interest in the game, I completely adhered to the financial rewards under the form of bonuses we received, but also the reputation of being a well-published scholar. Growing in the game allowed me to acquire a ‘feel for the game’, a practical adaptation to the game which colonized my mind and my body (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 77). This made me sometimes feel as a professional athlete who plays so well and feels in control of the game that she has an intimate conviction that she will win the game. This alternated with moments of discouragement when I thought I was a mere imposter (Bothello & Roulet, 2019), but these moments had the paradoxical effect of making me pursue even more ferociously the illusory stakes of the game. Third, the belief and adherence to the stakes of the game made me sacrifice things I cared a lot about such as time spent with my family. The concept of *illuio* has been a useful lens in this reflexivity process as it allowed exploring academic publishing as a form of game playing which colonizes the mind and bodies of those caught in it (Lupu & Empson, 2015). My world was ordered by the research activities and interactions. Most of my time and energy were dedicated to them. The thought of a research idea or crafting a complex argument was often at the back of my mind...and worse, I was judging my co-authors through the prism of their research involvement...blaming them for not giving priority to their research. How did I end up so caught in the game and its requirements? Reflecting back on this question, it was a gradual process of socialization which happened with every paper I published, every little academic success I had conditioned me for wanting to achieve even more. A stay during the early years of my career in a top Business School taught me many things about how to publish in top journals. I had the opportunity to meet some of the best researchers in my field and to learn from them about doing research which gets published. However, in this process, I inadvertently got enmeshed in the *illuio* of the field and forgot what was important for me.

My second contribution is to expand the literature examining why and how knowledge workers resist to extreme work conditions. Prior literature has shown that people can resist to socialization and culture which prompts them to overwork with negative consequences for their personal lives and health. While these papers show that workers' re-

sistance has mixed effects and sometime ends up reinforcing compliance, I want to focus on contributing to an emerging stream of research which explores resistance to oppressive organizational practices through the body (Boncori & Smith, 2019; Huopainen & Satama, 2019; Michel, 2011). As socialization targets peoples' minds and the body cannot be completely socialized, in some conditions, it can become a means of resistance (Michel, 2011). By exploring my embodied experiences of pregnancy and giving birth, I show how the forced deceleration induced by the maternity leave as well as the Covid confinement contributed to an increased awareness and reflexivity thus helping me to transcend the illisio that prompted me to overwork. A shock, such as the one of giving birth, was needed to break the veil of the illisio and to make me realize the extent of my being caught by the game. More importantly, it could happen because of the time off I had for my maternity leave. This allowed me to step back and to reassess my work commitment. Moreover, drastic transformation of my bodily routines imposed by post-partum and breastfeeding as well as by the Covid context contributed to force me to limit my work involvement to four days a week, an organization which I have maintained (for most weeks) until the current moment.

To end this article, I also reflect on the extent of this conversion being reversible given the continued pressures of the academic context. In the context of the proliferation of managerialist controls of audit, accountability, monitoring and performativity, in order to be a successful academic, one has to become an "ideal academic". Ideal academics are expected to sacrifice personal time to their research activities which become their most important and noble occupation. But is that really so noble? In my experience, most research-driven academics (including myself) are individualistic and self-centered. They often sacrifice teaching and citizenship time for spending more time on doing research. They choose their co-authors and topics such as to maximize productivity and academic impact. This is often to the detriment of social impact or engaging with big societal challenges. Under the influence of the illisio of the game, we are often driven by a "paying off mentality... a sense of benefits and rewards that are expected to materialize in the short run" (Gendron, 2015, p. 169). Can I refuse to play this game if I am to stay in academia? Can I steer away from a performance control system which compels me to get in the rank with the others, to take the unique and narrow path to success as currently defined?

Speaking for myself, I think there might be a way for me to preserve myself from the illisio. This needs to pass through a closer construction of my research projects in connection with organizational/societal concerns as well as an engagement to disseminate research outside academia. Only in this way can we hope to become vectors of social change and to escape the sterile and self-referential academic game.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data are available upon request from the author. The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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How to cite this article: Lupu, I. (2021). An autoethnography of pregnancy and birth during Covid times: Transcending the illusio of overwork in academia?. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 28(5), 1898–1911. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12718>