Mental Health in the Academic Profession

:: **Davide Serpico and Malvina Ongaro**

Abstract

This feature summarizes the outputs from the *World Cafe* table concerning mental health in the academic profession, which took place at first meeting of the Milano Logic and Philosophy of Science Network (12 March 2025).

Keywords

Mental Health; Italian Academic Institutions; Research Environment.

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Mental health concerns in academia have increasingly come to light over the past few years. In a 2019 *Nature* editorial, Skipper ("The mental health of PhD researchers demands urgent attention," *Nature, 575*, 257-58, https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-019-03489-1) reported that over one-third of PhD students globally are at risk of developing mental disorders, with anxiety and depression being the most common. In a similar vein, Levy (2025, "Mind matters: investigating academia's 'mental health crisis'," *Nature Careers Podcast*, https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-024-04240-1) reported that the prevalence of mental health conditions is estimated at about 37% among researchers, faculty, and teachers, nearly double the rate in the general population. Stress, overwork, and job insecurity are cited as key drivers of poor mental health among academics; poor relationships with supervisors, lack of inclusivity and belonging, and the competitive environment of academia are also leading predictors of negative mental health outcomes. Although mental health is often framed as a personal matter, the structure and culture of academia play a crucial role in shaping scholars' wellbeing.

At the networking event held in Milan, scholars from multiple universities gathered not only to exchange ideas about science and its methods but also to reflect on the professional conditions in which such inquiry takes place. One insightful moment was the World Café on mental health is-

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sues in the research environment, where early-career scholars, postdocs, and faculty members engaged in a conversation about the emotional costs of academic life. The World Café opened with a simple question: "How would you describe the current culture in your department regarding mental health awareness?" Responses varied, but many participants shared a sense of silence or neglect around the topic. From there, the conversation touched on several interrelated issues.

A first key topic was the sense of inadequacy and self-doubt often promoted by the competitive nature of research: participants noted that academia fosters a culture of constant comparison, which is particularly acute in philosophy, where the standards of excellence are often opaque, and failure feels deeply personal. The passion-driven rhetoric "we are lucky to be paid to think" often conceals a system where identity and professional achievement are deeply entangled. This leads to a tendency to overwork, accept precarious conditions, and internalize failures. Relatedly, the publish-or-perish dynamic and publication pressures represent a major concern: philosophers reported feeling torn between the desire to pursue meaningful research and the need to meet quantifiable performance metrics. This results in "strategic publication" behaviors, such as chasing trendy topics rather than addressing questions that matter most to them. Over time, this disconnect can erode one's motivation and sense of purpose.

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Another point about individual-level difficulties concerned isolation and loneliness: unlike many other disciplines, philosophy is structurally solitary. With fewer research groups, labs, or collaborative frameworks, scholars often work in isolation. For early-career scholars in particular, short-term contracts and limited opportunities for long-term collaborations further deepen this sense of alienation. Participants also raised concerns about the difficulty of escaping toxic work environments, given the small size of the philosophical community and the pervasiveness of power asymmetries.

At a more systemic level, we witnessed considerations about career insecurity and structural uncertainty: the lack of long-term job prospects makes it nearly impossible to plan for the future. Choices about where to live, whether to start a family, or how to invest in personal and professional life are all shaped by short-term contracts and the constant need to relocate. Even for those who manage to "do everything right," the randomness of success – being "in the right place at the right time" – leads to a sense of unfairness and frustration. Many participants highlighted how deeply structural many of these issues are. The sense of injustice is not just about unequal treatment but about how the entire system seems to reward availability, mobility, and productivity in ways that often contradict a healthy life.

While the diagnosis was often critical, the discussion also produced a range of suggestions and practices that can promote healthier academic environments.

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Participants stressed the importance of creating daily routines and protecting personal time – avoiding emails on weekends or holidays, for instance. Focusing on long-term, value-driven research, rather than immediate performance goals, was also seen as vital to reclaiming scholarly integrity. A recurring proposal was the development of practices alleviating the sense of loneliness and enhancing the relationship between scholars of different career levels. First, working in shared offices or coworking environments can counter isolation and foster informal exchange and mutual support. Second, young scholars could benefit from having multiple mentors to whom they can turn for different kinds of support: despite the persistent stigma, asking for help was described as a critical and often underutilized resource. Relatedly, participants proposed structured forums for mutual education between senior and junior scholars – spaces where experiences, struggles, and coping strategies can be shared across career levels. However, this idea was also met with caution, as we must consider that expressing vulnerability in a context that remains hierarchical and characterized by power structures can lead to distortions and manipulation.

Finally, many participants emphasized that mental health challenges in academia are not simply matters of individual resilience. Structural injustices – precarity, competition, metric-based evaluation – must be addressed at the institutional and policy level. While personal strategies can offer short-term relief, long-term wellbeing requires some sort of

systemic reform. More established academics have a crucial role in modelling sustainable practices, offering support, and helping to enhance departmental norms. This includes being transparent about the realities of academic life and actively working to reduce the pressure on younger colleagues.

This World Café was a rare and valuable opportunity to reflect collectively on the costs of academic life and the possibilities for making it more humane. Philosophy, perhaps more than other disciplines, seems to us an ideal context to develop the conceptual and ethical tools to lead this cultural change.

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