

Academic and Digital Labor's Intangible Feel and Problematic Consequences: An Individual Solution

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This essay introduces and illustrates the author's lack of feeling that he has a job in academia. Subsequently it explores possible reasons for what the author calls "academic labor's intangible feel," including personal and structural ones, after which negative consequences of the feeling are identified. Then broader observations are made about work in contemporary, digital society. Finally, the essay suggests a solution on the level of the individual to mitigate the negative consequences.

Academia | Alienation | David Graeber | Digital labor | Neoliberalism

Introduction

The single strongest piece of evidence that indicates that I do indeed "have a job" in academia in the standard definition of the phrase consists of the pay check I dutifully receive every month. In fact, plenty of additional evidence supports the contention. For instance, I possess a "staff card" that affords me access to a building, and one of its offices. It contains a desk and a computer, among other things often found in legitimate work environments, like posters and slogans that try to entertain and enlighten, a landline, drawers, shelves with books on them, a trash can by the door, and on the wall a dart board featuring magnetic darts in a pattern indicating a low level of skill. Down the hall in one direction I can print things for free. Down the other way I can reliably find free coffee between 9 and 5 on weekdays.

In addition, I know people who identify as my colleagues. The feeling is mutual. We chat in the hallway, when we happen to run into each other, and hold occasional meetings in conference rooms. Other people (young and large in number) call themselves "my students." They regularly show up when I talk and ask questions about topics I know a lot about, for two hours on Tuesday mornings, in a room with no windows, in an area known as university campus. Those same students also, though less frequently, appear on Thursday mornings for seminars, which I lead in another building in the same area. During these I talk less and ask more questions.

The available evidence thus overwhelmingly indicates that I do indeed "have a job." So, why do I not feel that I have a job? What are the consequences of this lack of feeling for how I, and possibly others working in academia, perform their "job" and think about it? How does academic work compare to the many other similar jobs in contemporary society? How do the digital aspects of these jobs play a role in creating feelings of pointlessness? Finally, how could academics and other workers mitigate the negative consequences of this lack of feeling?

Why Academic Labor Feels Intangible

Part of the explanation for not feeling that I have a job is situated in my personal background. I was a diffident BA student in the Netherlands. I hardly talked in class and received average marks. The reason, though, was that I cared not too little about higher education, but too much. I did not consciously formulate it to myself at the time, but I had already constructed a very idealized and inflated view of the academy. In the back of my mind, I have always admired professors and wanted to be one. To be frank, I probably feared I was not good enough to ever become a professor, so for a long time I did not try. When I arrived at university as a BA student, I inevitably became disappointed. Many professors and students did not seem to care much, certainly much less than I, about the subject they were teaching or studying. My first major was literature. I was shocked to learn that many fellow students did not have strong feelings about books, whereas I hated some books and their authors, whom I had never met, had disdain for others, and felt love for or kinship toward yet others.

When I got home from class, I would read—books that were not on any syllabus, but that I discovered in the university library. I felt like I was the only student who was like this; I never met another student like me. In addition, this was the 1990s and postmodernism was in full swing. Frankly, I thought many of my professors were full of nonsense. They questioned the notion of a reality outside of our heads that we could know, whereas I, paradoxically and naively, expected the university to teach me how the "real world" (the one outside the university) works. Disillusioned, I transferred to a journalism school, a polytechnic to use the British term (Hochschule in German). In the end, after being disabused of the notion that journalists spend most of their time finding out how the real world works, I returned to the university proper and finished a BA in American Studies, while also completing the BA in Journalism.

With my middling academic record, it seemed impossible that I would ever get the opportunity to start a PhD, let alone land a job as a professor. I worked as a journalist for a few years. At one point, I became bored. Or rather, I felt my soul slowly being crushed by the lack of creativity, critical thinking, and autonomy. Working as a journalist in the mainstream, commercial media was severely ideologically restricting. I did not believe in the product that I was producing. I took an MA while working as a journalist and was accepted to a PhD program in the United States, which I finished in five years. My first job turned out to be in Beijing. It was not my cup of tea. More than three years later, I landed my current job. I have enjoyed it from day one.

On the most basic level, then, I do not feel that I have a job because mine is in academia. It is what I always wanted to do. I spent about a decade acquiring one. It does not feel like a job because I never thought I would make it even this far. Along the way, I saw many who tried, like me, fail. As

Oscar Wilde once observed: “It is not enough to succeed; others have to fail.” Many have, which means that I succeeded. I should (and often do) feel blessed and contented. In addition, the work does not feel like work because it suits me so well. I still cannot believe I am making money by just performing me. If I could do whatever I wanted to, I would do the same every morning that I do now: get up early and withdraw in a room to think, plan, read, and write. To me that is life.

My job does not feel like a job, then, because it feels like I am not working. The flip side is that it never feels that I am not working. This subjectivity makes the job easy but also exhausting. It is never done. It is always there. It bleeds into everything else I do while I am not “working.” I have had other jobs. I mean, I have had jobs. They felt like jobs. They were done when I left the building and started again only when I walked back in the following day.

Many other reasons can be given for academic labor not feeling like “work.” One, with only a few exceptions you can come to campus when you want. Or not. Authority, which certainly exists, does not often exert itself, certainly rarely blatantly. The same goes for deadlines. There are some, but most often you set your own. Or not. Two, the amount of work you could put into a certain task is almost always, let’s say, elastic. In other words, in academic work you often need to make this type of decision: to spend a lot of time on any task or to spend less time.

Quite a few reasons for the intangible feel of academic work relate to doing research. Although there exists disagreement on the topic (Evans, 2008; Eveleth, 2014), one study has found that less than half of all papers had received not a single citation five years after publication (Hamilton, 1990). Paraphrasing the hackneyed philosophical issue of the tree falling in the forest without anyone there to observe it, one might ask whether one truly wrote and published that journal article. After all, there was no one there to read it. Research, while the most important part of the job for those on the tenure track or tenured, is generally ignored by other researchers, in addition of course to the general public. And if research is read, feedback remains rare.

So if the job is not observed or acknowledged, was it still performed? Either way, it does not feel like it was performed. It can feel as if the effort was wasted. It can feel as if publishing research is a pointless exercise also because tenure and promotion criteria often do not clearly spell out requirements, for instance as to the type and number of publications required.

In addition, whether a manuscript is published or not often depends on the peculiar tastes and ideologies of editors and anonymous reviewers (Smith, 2006; Oransky, 2016). A researcher found that “luck ... plays a strong role in determining which papers are published” (Flaherty, 2017). Given that decisions to publish or not to publish affect contract renewal and tenure decisions, and that the editorial process often takes at least half a year, it is no wonder that

academics get nervous and anxious a lot. It is not just that the peer review system is flawed, and thus cannot be relied upon. The whole, drawn-out process, whether fairly executed or not, is nerve-wrecking.

Oscar Wilde once observed: “Give a man a mask and he will tell you the truth.” But the opposite is just as true. Why tell the truth if you can vent your frustrations without the object of your ire ever finding out who you are? In other words, some reviewers take advantage of the mask. Dealing with unfair, even overtly malicious reviews, is one of the most stressful aspects of an academic job.

At least to me, but I suspect to many academics, researching and writing are more a calling than a job. They are what I naturally do. So it does not feel like work. Also, research takes a while. Often, I walk out of my office in the afternoon and, when I have spent the day on research, I have that uncomfortable feeling of not having done or achieved anything. I have nothing solid to show for my day’s work. This perceived absence of something tangible makes it hard for me to consider it an honest day’s work, even if it really is. As a journalist I had a sense of accomplishment at the end of the day. The next morning I would see my achievements displayed in a newspaper or on a website—inexorable proof that I had worked: that I had a job.

Problematic Consequences of Academic Labor’s Intangible Feel

The intangible feel of academic labor generates a host of possible consequences, some of them contradictory. Different academics react differently to the same reality and the same academics react differently over time. What follows is an inventory of possible consequences, observed in myself and/or others.

The main consequence of academic labor’s intangible feel might be that quite a few academics feel insecure, even perpetually anxious. Because of the neoliberalization of the academy, not just in the United States and Britain, but also in traditional social-democratic countries like the Netherlands, western academics already have quite a few reasons to be anxious (Roos, 2015). Labor conditions, including labor security, have deteriorated, while the burgeoning class of administrators and students more and more adopt a commercial approach to the degree, which makes academic work less rewarding (e.g. Tuchman, 2009). Therefore, I am not positing that the intangible feel of academic labor is the only or even the main reason for academics’ anxiety. In this essay, I am simply highlighting it as one of many factors.

A major issue is that the academic’s job performance criteria are vague. How high do student feedback scores have to be to make them acceptable? Will one’s supervisor take ameliorating circumstances into account when the scores are clearly low? How about depending on a group of young people who don’t know your subject area and are preoccupied anticipating their date on Friday evening as the

main judges of whether you are a good teacher? Similarly, when is a publication “excellent”? Which ones even count at all (for instance, this one)? Vagueness of the criteria can result in feeling that whatever you do, it never feels good enough. Much emotional labor, which in turn creates its own anxiety, can come to feel imperative (Lawless, 2018).

Every individual reacts differently to the insecurity that stems from academic labor’s intangible feel. I have observed conformity, hard work, and a continuous need to impress colleagues and bosses with “achievements,” among many other reactions. Special mention deserves the widespread practice of academics to often tell each other how hard they are working. Hard work needs to be asserted because it is rarely observed or acknowledged. Academics usually work alone, hidden in their office. For a few hours every week during the semester they can be observed to be working, namely when they teach, though of course colleagues don’t observe them then either. Only if academics do not teach during the hours they are supposed to, this will be noticed, whereas if you work on the assembly line, your slacking off is immediately observable.

Thus, academics feel the need to create an image of themselves that foregrounds the hard work that they do often engage in. The urge becomes a real problem only when it starts to feel more important to create the impression that you are working hard than, well, working hard. Because some academics work hard at creating a public image of a hard-working self, they are especially susceptible to succumbing to imposter syndrome (McMillan, 2016). They are acutely aware that they are projecting a self-flattering, partly untrue image of themselves, and of the image’s gap with reality.

Other reactions to academic labor’s intangible feel include academics being keenly aware of making sure they spend much time on activities that they know will advance their career, such as doing research, sometimes to the detriment of other important tasks, including teaching and service. Some academics guard their research time like grizzlies guard their cubs.

Work in Contemporary, Digital Society

Academia is part of society. As an exercise in sociological imagination, I wonder if, and if so to what extent, what I feel and experience is widely shared. Indeed, I see similarities between my feelings and experiences and many others’. Jobs that primarily consist of shuffling paper (reading and writing) and having meetings (speaking)—which include so many jobs these days—can easily come to feel unreal and pointless in ways similar to what I have described in this essay. The anthropologist David Graeber writes:

In the year 1930, John Maynard Keynes predicted that, by century’s end, technology would have advanced sufficiently that countries like Great Britain or the United States would have achieved a 15-hour work week. There’s every reason to

believe he was right. In technological terms, we are quite capable of this. And yet it didn’t happen. Instead, technology has been marshalled, if anything, to figure out ways to make us all work more. In order to achieve this, jobs have had to be created that are, effectively, pointless. (Graeber, 2013)

Without entering into a discussion on the objective social value of particular jobs, perhaps especially in “developed economies,” many people certainly feel that their jobs are pointless or, more starkly, “bullshit,” notes Graeber. They “are performing tasks they secretly believe do not really need to be performed.” Though I have my moments of doubt, on the whole I do feel that my job has social value. I also think that any objective evaluation of the social value of one’s work is not as significant in creating feelings of pointlessness that many people experience as Graeber seems to make it out to be. I think that, beyond any evaluation of objective social value, the following are important factors for the widespread feelings of pointlessness.

Most work, gig or not, is still done within large bureaucracies, which unavoidably produce Catch-22 situations that leave one frustrated with the seeming lack of logic and efficiency that stems from the internal “logic” of the organization more than any objective assessment. Writing and speaking as the core products of work are more symbolic than tangible. One writes an internal report. It disappears in a drawer. One lectures to students and finds that quite a few missed the core points. One can speak a lot in a meeting or little; either way, it often seems to matter little.

Consistent with my experiences, the work under discussion is often performed in solitude and thus hardly ever observed, which makes people feel the urge to announce and “perform” their work. The work often lacks firm criteria. Evaluation depends on a subjective judgment by a supervisor and others, which highlights the importance of relationships instead of the work itself. The work thus requires much emotional labor. All these aspects of the job can lead to the negative consequences I described, including that the job is not really a job, but a pointless daily exercise that magically adds money to one’s bank account.

In addition, I would like to highlight a factor that Graeber touches but does not elaborate on: technology, specifically the digital nature of much work, especially professional work, even more so during the Covid-19 pandemic. It seems to me that the digital aspect of work (most obviously, emails) contributes a lot to its sense of “unrealness.”

The mediated nature of work often seems, at best, a mixed blessing. Just as it is easier, psychologically speaking, to drop bombs on people from afar, mediated by a computer screen, it is also easier, because again less psychologically taxing, to lie via a chat screen than it is to do so face-to-face. It is even easier to send an email claiming you are sick than picking up the phone and telling that lie. Therefore, many people likely perceive work done digitally as less real than face-to-face work, even in cases when it arguably has at least some social value. The digital aspect of mediated work

can promote feelings of alienation, if one is not careful. People can more easily give in to the urge to settle for sloppy work, even to act unethically, in an online environment than in an office environment.

Digital technology has made the office seem redundant. This has been highlighted by the Covid-19 pandemic, which has led to many “bullshit jobs” being performed from home or anywhere with a stable Wi-Fi connection. Techno-optimists will argue that here we have a clear example of technological progress providing us with more “freedom.” It is important not to dismiss such an argument out of hand. There is some truth there, which needs no illustration, as we all can come up with examples from our own lives. The crucial point, not just in this context but when assessing technology in general, is that truth can be as blinding as error, if not more so. Because digital technologies provide what is called—inexactly and ideologically loaded—more “freedom,” it becomes harder to see their downsides. A more precise formulation would be that digital technology provides “flexibility,” in other words, a type of convenience. Flexibility is a far cry from freedom.

Beyond its small benefits, the decline of the necessity of doing work in the office contributes to the feelings of pointlessness. It inhibits the development and flourishing of work communities and thereby contributes to the loss of meaning of work. For it seems to me that much of the meaning people derive from their jobs is, in fact, quite separate from their content and social impact. “Just a job” becomes meaningful to people simply because it is performed together. Digital technologies loosen these social ties and, thus, can be a factor in people feeling their job lacks meaning.

Conclusion: Feeling Good Anyway

How to counter the negative consequences of academic and other labor’s intangible feel? One could think of many ways, including organizing. Here, I would like to focus on one promising tactic. I recently realized that I have been setting all the wrong goals, namely what I now call “outcome-based goals.” For instance, a goal of mine would be: to publish two papers before the end of the year. Now I realize that this makes little sense, for I do not control whether something I write is published. It is much better for one’s mental health to set what I now call “effort-based goals.” So a current goal of mine is: I will spend at least 10 hours a week on researching and writing. The advantage is that the achievement of my goal is in my own hands.

If in one week I fail to achieve it, I can get up earlier or make another change to achieve it in the next week. Others have called this “process goals” (Expert Program Management, n.d.). In short, a way to mitigate the negative consequences of academic labor’s intangible feel is to set goals that are meaningful to you and within your control, and to try to take a Zen-like attitude to the ways your efforts are well received by the organization you work in and the world

beyond it. Yes, it constitutes a sad comment on the current state of academia that academics have to be urged to become more Zen-like in an effort to cope. Yet, constructive systemic changes seem unlikely at this point, including regarding the trend towards contingent labor (Hogler, 2017; Shulman, 2017). In the meantime, we can at least try to make ourselves feel a bit better by as much as possible doing meaningful work.

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