

The Leak in the Academic Pipeline: Identity, Control, and Mental Health among Postdoctoral Women

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Imposter syndrome. Sexism. Maternity leave. The glass ceiling. The glass cliff. These are just a few of the challenges that disproportionately affect women in academia (and beyond), and perpetuate the leaky pipeline metaphor for women who opt-out of an academic career. Although this pattern can be seen at all levels of the academic hierarchy, we argue that a critical time for women facing such challenges is during the postdoctoral stage, when personal life changes and professional ambitions often collide. Many of the issues facing postdoctoral women involve identity development (e.g., as a mother, a scientist, etc.) along with a sense of uncertainty about control over one's future personal and/or professional prospects. These challenges, coupled with institutions that lack equitable structures and policies for women, create a climate ripe for career abandonment.

In this mixed-method research, Study 1 comprised an online study ($N=295$) of early career researchers from a range of academic disciplines (e.g., psychology, physics, biology) and across several countries (e.g., Germany, Canada, United States) to assess relations among social identification (i.e., disciplinary, national, gender, and university), perceived control (i.e., confidence, work and life control), and mental health (i.e., depression, anxiety, stress, and life satisfaction) across gender and early career stages. Hierarchical regression analyses revealed that being a woman, a postdoc, and having children are risk factors for lower confidence, perceived control, and satisfaction with life, and for higher self-reported stress and depressive symptoms. However, strongly identifying with one's discipline was most protective both in terms of perceived control and mental health.

Study 2 comprised interviews with postdoctoral women in North America ($n=13$) and Europe ($n=8$) across a range disciplines. Common themes included negative impacts of career uncertainty on mental and physical health, attempts to overcome or ignore gender inequality by focusing on one's disciplinary (rather than gender) identity, and institutional barriers—especially related to maternity leave and pay.

Taken together, these findings shed light on the importance of disciplinary identity (and the lack of support gained by identifying with one's gender), and point to the postdoctoral stage as being particularly tenuous for women regardless of academic background or nationality.