

Being a female academic under neoliberal evaluation: A systematic review

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Being a female academic under neoliberal evaluation: A systematic review

Abstract

The current academic assessment system is drawing a scenario based on neo-liberal values. It has contributed to the perpetuation of gender inequalities. This systematic literature review aims to synthesise the most relevant research on the impact of neoliberalism on the professional identity of female academics. For this purpose, a systematised bibliographic search was carried out in four different databases (Web of Science, Scopus, Education Resources Information Center and Google Scholar), which yielded a total of 26 articles published in international journals. The results illustrate a research field dominated by the United States and the United Kingdom and a trajectory of growth in the literature in recent years. The emerging themes reveal some of the challenges faced by women academics in a neoliberal context. These obstacles may be external and even unconsciously imposed by women academics themselves. Motherhood emerges as one of the most influential aspects of their professional development. Furthermore, our findings explore various ways in which women academics reconstruct their identity in the face of systemic challenges. This manuscript culminates with a discussion of the impact that neoliberal values and their general consequences in the performance evaluation processes of academics have on women. Therefore, we provide a number of implications for professional practice and future lines of research.

Keywords: neoliberalism, higher education, evaluation, professional identity, gender, systematic review.

Introduction

Gender inequalities have always been present in academia, being reflected in aspects such as the considerably higher number of women at lower academic levels and with more precarious working conditions (Gill and Donoghue 2016; Pyke 2013; Bozzon et al. 2018). However, despite a decrease thanks to the development of policies aimed at improving women's access and participation (Lipton 2020), these differences remain due to the predominant culture in academia.

The highly masculinised work culture, the generally male-dominated research fields and disciplines, and even the division of labour based on traditional gender norms (Findlow 2012; Bozzon et al. 2018; Leahwood 2018), mean that women face a number of additional challenges. These include gender stereotypes, male partner expectations, unequal sharing of tasks, the impact of childcare, etc. (Barbazon 2014; Leathwood and Read 2012; Bozzon et al. 2018; El-Far, Sabella and Varchinina 2020). These aspects contribute to a more unfair and unfavourable situation for women in academia (Lipton 2020).

Moreover, the advent of Neoliberalism has especially contributed to the perpetuation of these inequalities. Although this ideology is presented as gender-neutral, it contributes to the male-dominated culture of academia through its principles of competitiveness, freedom and individualisation (Blackmore 2014). These foster processes of self-blame in response to failure (Davies and Bansel 2010) which contribute to the silencing of gender inequalities (Lipton 2020). As a consequence, female academics become much more vulnerable, affecting both their lives and their work (Jackson 2018).

Given this situation, the identity dimension of female academics, who have to survive in a neoliberal and masculinised world, has begun to be a priority in present agendas and lines of research (Abramo, D'Angelo & Murgia 2013; Ceci, Williams, & Barnett 2009; Lester 2008). To understand what factors influence and take part in the (re)construct the professional being of female academics we focus on their professional identity and how this complex intersection between gender and neoliberalism occurs in academia. As Dubar (2000) argues, identity construction involves a dual process (identity for oneself and identity for others). In this way, both personal and intimate elements, and the political, social and professional context play an important role in its development. For this reason, this article addresses this issue from an identity-based approach.

As stated by relevant authors in this field of study, identity is a subjective concept (Court 2005, Ricoeur, 1996), which is in constant social interaction, which enhances a feeling of dependence and belonging to social groups (Bolivar 2006; Tajfel and Turner 1979). In this way, we could define professional identity as the result of a progressive process in which different life and professional experiences come into play

that consolidate the way of feeling and give meaning to professional work (Bolívar, 2006). Scribner and Crow (2012) concur adding that the concept of professional identity is related to the examination of values, beliefs and motivations that influence professional work and, therefore, takes us beyond mechanistic practices that have limited utility.

Specifically, the professional identity of the academic undergoes different transformations throughout his or her professional career (Herrera, Fernández, Caballero & Trujillo, 2011). Gewerc (2011) points out that the construction of identity begins to be defined in the course of primary socialization and then, in the initial training process, with the construction of a set of competencies and their internalization that will identify the teacher as a person shaped by multiple life experiences. The meaning that each one attributes to training is related to the motivations that make him/her learn and interact with others. This sense makes the teacher mobilize strategies coherent with his or her own professional career and with the motivations that insert him or her in the training, constituting the central axis of his or her identity project (Gewerc, 2011). Thus, Zabalza (2011) highlights how the social construction of the teaching staff cannot be alien to the moment and the context in which they are immersed. Therefore, the university and the community in general must assume the commitment to establish fair and coherent internal policies and dynamics. The following section offers a theoretical approach to the neoliberal scenario in the university context, and also delves into the identity influence of being a woman in a performative context.

Neoliberalism, gender and higher education: A preview note

Neoliberalism has imbued Higher Education, not only affecting and transforming its social functions and educational goals, but also its organisation, its culture and its ways of creating and legitimising knowledge (McCowan 2017; Javadi and Azizzadeh 2020; Tulubas and Gokturk 2020; Dougherty and Natow 2019).

However, specifying and defining the term neoliberalism is an arduous task due to the wide variety of approaches from which it can be addressed (Clarke, 2008). When talking about this concept we refer not only to an economic and political doctrine, but also to a form of governance (Lipton 2020) and to the philosophy that is dominating almost all spheres of life (Tight 2019). Generally speaking, we can understand Neoliberalism as a doctrine whose main objective is to make agencies and entities much more economically efficient (Dougherty and Natow 2019). Therefore, neoliberalism makes use of Higher Education as a means to enhance the growth of the economy through the development of its quality (Harland 2009; Tomicic 2019).

In order to achieve these goals, international literature highlights two main fields of action (Tulubas and Gokturk 2020; Saura 2016). On the one hand, the development of strategies or actions focused on promoting the privatisation and the free market

economy (Díez-Gutiérrez 2018; Olssen and Peters 2005; Saura and Bolívar 2019). However, this set of practices is sometimes insufficient. Therefore, at the same time, a second group of actions is being developed, focused on fostering competitiveness and individualisation through a policy based on a mixture of auditing, evaluation and incentives (Brøgger 2019a; Dougherty and Natow 2019; Karlsson, 2017). In the university world, this can be seen in the development of evaluation and comparison systems (rankings) based on the quantification of different aspects (teaching, courses, professors, management, research, etc.), and on whose results depend the possibility of obtaining foundings, opening or closing courses, student enrolments, etc. (Gill and Donoghue, 2016). In short, it is a new form of political control that mixes the "quantification of quality" (Lorenz, 2015) with an important incentive system. This new form of political control is based on principles of performativity (Foucault, 1991) and governmentality (Ball, 2003), and its success lies in its persuasive character and its ability to generate behavioral changes.

In the specific case of university academics, these methods have resulted in a proliferation of evaluation systems that measure the quality of professional performance through its quantification. These evaluations are fundamental for accessing, promoting and even obtaining incentives (eg. grants, founding, projects, etc.) in the university world (Ma and Ladisch, 2019; San Fabián 2020). Furthermore, the fact that research is the most valuable activity has contributed to it becoming the main academics' objective (San Fabián 2020; Bermúdez-Aponte and Laspalas 2017). As a result, excellence in research has become one of the fundamental tenets of the new Neoliberal Academy. In this sense, there are a wide variety of evaluation systems that follow these principles throughout the world such as the *Research Excellence framework (REF)* in United Kingdom, the *Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA)* in Australia, or the *Programa de Evaluación del Profesorado (PEP)* in Spain.

This new academy generates a highly competitive and individualised environment (Olssen and Peters 2005) that contributes to the development of new academic subjectivities (Englund and Gerdin 2019). As a consequence, academics become a publications' "factory" subjected to processes of self-government and self-responsibility (Saura and Bolívar 2019).

In addition, recent research demonstrates how these neoliberal principles and values that pervade the academy have strong gendered consequences for female academics (Morley and Crossouard 2016; van den Brink and Benschop 2012). Thus, Neoliberalism affects at the structural, individual and professional levels, further aggravating gender inequalities in university (Linková 2017; Shore and Wright 2015). In this context, it not only intensifies the already existing gender barriers in the academy, but also contributes to their invisibilization through processes of self-blame for failure (Davies and Bansel, 2010).

In response to this situation, in recent years, an important body of research focuses on analysing the impact of these new forms of political control on the professional identity of female academics has been produced. In view of this increase, there is a need to carry out a systematic review of the literature which enables, on the one hand, to collect and synthesise in in-depth the most relevant contributions to this field of study. On the other hand, to identify professional implications and future lines of research. To this end, our aim was to answer the following research questions:

Research question 1: What are the main characteristics of studies in this field of research (methodological approaches, instruments, contexts, etc.)?

Research question 2: What are the primary factors that influence the professional identity of female academics in a neoliberalised academy?

Research question 3: What are the main strategies and professional identities developed by female academics as a consequence of the new neoliberal university's demands?

Research question 4: What are the future lines of research and implications for professional practice proposed by the studies included in this review?

To answer these questions, we first carried out a systematic process of searching for relevant scientific literature on our topic. This was followed by a thematic analysis of the results (Braun and Clarke 2006) which allowed us to obtain a general overview of the field of study. Finally, it should be noted that this manuscript is part of a wider research project entitled “XXX” (REF: XXX).

Method

Study Design

This study used a qualitative systematic review protocol (Petticrew and Roberts 2006; Gough, Oliver and Thomas 2012.). It is a growing methodology that synthesizes common themes of interest from a comprehensive review of the selected literature (Voorberg, Bekkers and Tummers 2015). Due to the large number of studies in this field of research, it was considered necessary to use this method in order to prioritize the search and selection processes. According to Hammersley (2020), “the systematic review movement has served a useful general function in giving emphasis to the importance of active searching for relevant literature, rather than relying primarily upon existing knowledge in a field” (p. 29).

Although systematic literature reviews have multiple criticisms (Hammersley, 2020), their exhaustive and systematized nature contributes to the development of discipline in the search and review of documents (Littell, Corcoran and Pillai; 2008). In this way, it is possible to reduce subjectivity, to minimize bias in the selection and inclusion of studies and to consider all relevant literature on the subject.

In order to bring rigour and quality to our research, this review followed the PRISMA Statement (Moher et al. 2009). The choice of this method is based on two fundamental reasons. First, it can be applied to any field of knowledge without necessarily being linked to clinical trials. And, secondly, because it is a technique that contributes to the development of the quality of systematic reviews (Pérez, 2012).

Search Procedures

Four databases were used on the search for relevant research that met our study purpose. On the one hand, the *Web of Science (WoS)* and *Scopus* databases were selected because of their academic recognition at an international level and due to the effectiveness of their analytical tools, which allow us to detect high-impact research journals. Likewise, these databases only index studies published in "peer review" publications. On the other hand, the *Education Resources Information Center (ERIC)* database was selected for its relevance in the field of education. And finally, we also decided to choose Google Scholar since it is an important source of grey literature (books, doctoral theses, book chapters...etc.) an aspect that complemented our search process. However, in the end, no examples of grey literature were included in the present review.

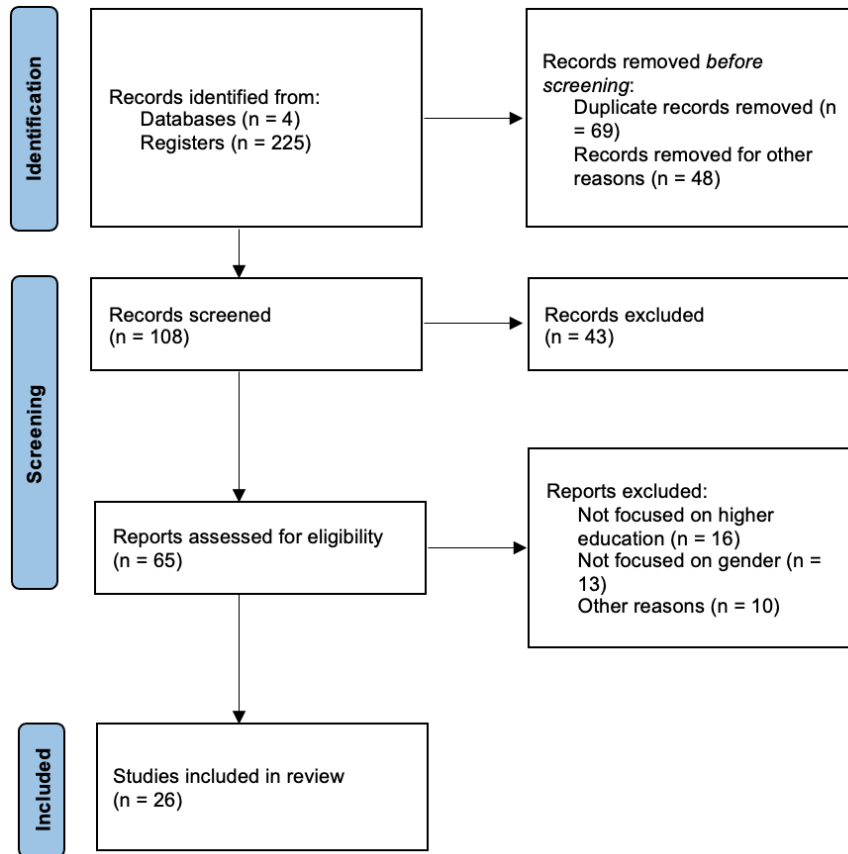
There were two important research moments to ensure accuracy. A first search was carried out in June 2020 and a second search in September 2020. All articles indexed before October 2020 were considered for our current study. Furthermore, it was used a number of keywords that were combine with Boolean so as to construct the following search equation: ("academic identity" OR "professional identity") AND "higher education" AND (wom*n OR gender OR female) AND ("neoliberalism" OR "managerialism").

Inclusion/exclusion criteria and study selection

For the selection of studies, in a first stage, criteria of inclusion and exclusion from the databases themselves were established. The literature included were studies published in peer-reviewed journals that (1) had an article format, (2) has as research domain "Social Sciences" and (3) were in the research field of "Education, Educational Research". In a second stage, we proceeded to the reading of abstracts and then to the reading of full texts. In this second phase the inclusion/exclusion criteria were mainly pragmatic criteria, i.e., the level of adequacy with the objectives of the present research (Booth, Panpainnou and Sutton 2012). In this sense, therefore, the studies had to deal with the impact of neoliberalism on the academic/professional identity of female academics. Consequently, the studies have to focus on academic or professional identity in the neoliberalized academy, they had to be related to the higher education stage, and they had to contemplate a gender dimension. Figure 1 illustrates the process of selection and exclusion of studies carried out by two authors and verified by two other researchers. A

total of 26 articles were finally selected for the systematic review. These articles were finally evaluated for eligibility in a consensus among the authors.

Fig 1 PRISMA's flow chart.



Data Extraction and Synthesis

Once the 26 studies were selected, an Excel database was created to collect the following information: (a) authors and year, (b) countries of publication, (c) main themes, (d) research purposes and questions, (e) methods used, (f) results, (g) conclusions and (h) theoretical implications for the research. Each author read the selected studies thoroughly and individually. Subsequently, the authors coded the aforementioned characteristics through a peer review (Sarhou 2016). And finally, a thematic analysis of the articles was conducted (Braun and Clarke 2006) using a qualitative analysis software (Nvivo 12). In the process of analyzing the information, main themes that emerged from the reading of the studies were detected. Within these main themes, sub-themes were identified and organized in a logical order. The final aim was to contribute to a structured and coherent analysis. The emerging themes identified by the researchers were put into consensus on the basis of similarity.

Results

This section presents, on the one hand, the main characteristics of the 26 studies analysed and, on the other hand, the emerging issues after information analysis. First, we expose an overview of the temporal evolution of the literature, a synthesis of the research purposes and an overview of the research designs. And finally, the emerging topics will be discussed.

Study Characteristics

A) Growth Trajectory of the Literature

We found a total of 26 articles published on the impact of neoliberalism on the impact on the academic/professional identity of female academics in recent decades. Table 1 shows the growth trajectory of the included literature. Since 2002, with the first article found, we observe two main trends. On the one hand, we note a certain balance in the number of publications during the first years, among which we find years with no publications (2004, 2013), and others with only one (2003, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2017) or two publications (2002, 2006, 2015). And, secondly, we notice an increase in the years 2018 and 2019, both with a maximum peak of 4 published articles. It is important to point out that this study only takes into account the manuscripts indexed in the selected databases, so it does not represent all the published knowledge on the influence of gender in university education.

Table 1 Growth Trajectory of the Literature

Year	Author
2002	Saunderson (2002); Thomas and Davies (2002)
2003	Fothergill and Feltey (2003)
2004	-
2005	Davies et al. (2005)
2006	Barry, Berg and Chandler (2006); Wolf and Ward (2006)
2007	Acker and Armenti (2007)
2008	Reybol and Alamia (2008)
2009	Discroll et al. (2009)
2010	Hernández et al. (2010)
2011	Waitere et al. (2011)
2012	Nikunen (2012)
2013	-
2014	Grant and Elizabeth (2014)
2015	Salle, Ward and Wolf (2015); Wolf and Ward (2015)
2016	Angervall (2016)
2017	Kandico et al. (2017)
2018	Allner (2018); Caretta (2018); Marine and Martínez (2018); Wilkinson (2018)
2019	Abetz (2019); Engen, Bleijenbergh and Beijer (2019); Healey and Davies (2019); Vaugh et al. (2019).
2020	Malauma, Pick and Htwe (2020)

B) Research purposes and contexts

Articles included present various objectives which we have grouped into three main purposes. Table 2 summarizes the research purposes of the 26 articles analysed.

Table 2 Main research purposes in our studies included

Main research purposes	Studies included in the systematic review
To analyze women's self-limitations and external barriers in their professional development.	Vaugh et al (2019) Barry, Berg and Chandler (2006) Angervall (2016) Thomas and Davies (2002) Healey and Davies (2019) Reybold and Alemani (2008) Davies et al. (2005) Driscoll et al. (2009)
To explore the impact of motherhood on academia.	Abetz (2019) Caretta (2018) Nikunen (2012) Acker and Armenti (2007) Wolf and Ward (2015) Wolf and Ward (2006) Allner (2018) Fothergill and Feltey (2003) Salle, Ward and Wolf (2015) Engen, Bleijenbergh and Beijer (2019)
To study the construction and reconstruction of female academics' identity in a neoliberalism context.	Wilkinson (2018) Hernández et al. (2010) Driscoll et al. (2009) Barry, Berg and Chandler (2006) Saunderson (2002) Fothergill and Feltey (2003) Kandiko, Howson et al. (2017) Grant and Elizabeht (2014) Nikunen (2012) Malauma, Pick and Htwe (2020) Acker and Armenti (2007) Marine and Martinez (2018) Davies et al. (2005) Engen, Bleijenbergh and Beijer (2019)

With regard to the geographical distribution of the studies, we observe a clear predominance of the number of investigations carried out in the United States (9) and the United Kingdom (6). However, we also found studies in other areas of the world such as New Zealand (2), the Netherlands (1), Spain (1), Sweden (1), Switzerland (1) Australia (2), Indonesia (1), Canada (1) Finland (1).

The participants in the study were mainly female academics, although there were some studies of mixed samples. The professional categories as well as the scientific disciplines of the samples were varied. In addition, the samples included both women with family responsibilities (pregnancies or children) and those without.

C) Study designs

Focusing on the research designs, we found that most of the articles included in our review present a qualitative methodology (22), while four are mixed methods (Fothergill and Feltey 2003; Saunderson 2002; Thomas and Davies 2002; Healey and Davies 2019) and only one is quantitative through surveys (Vaugh et al. 2019).

Within the qualitative approach, the use of interviews is particularly noteworthy (Abetz 2019; Acker and Armenti 2007; Angervall 2016; Barry, Berg and Chandler 2006; Grant and Elizabeth 2014; Kandiko et al 2017; Malauma, Pick and Htwe 2020; Nikunen 2012; Reybold and Alemani 2008; Salle, Ward and Wolf 2015; Thomas and Davies 2002; Vaughn et al. 2019; Wolf and Ward 2006; Wolf and Ward 2015); of which two have (auto)biographical-narrative approach (Davies et al. 2005; Marine and Martinez 2018). On the other hand, we strongly emphasize the use of ethnography and (auto)ethnographies (Caretta 2018; Discroll et al. 2009; Hernández, et al. 2010; Wilkinson, 2018). Finally, we also note the use of case studies, which make use primarily of interviews and focus groups (Allner 2018; Engen, Bleijenbergh and Beijer 2019; Waitere et al. 2011)

Thematic Analyses

A) Women academics: self-limitations and external barriers in their professional development

One of the main emerging topics from this systematic review was those internal and external elements that hindered the development and promotion of female academics. In reference to this, and focusing on the internal dimension of the individual, we find studies such as that of Vaughn et al. (2019). The findings of this study argue that often, those academics of great value express feelings of incompetence and lack of belonging. They also express feelings that link their achievements and progress to luck or effort. Coinciding with this, Reybold and Alamia (2008) point out that in particular, female junior academics are often subject to the impostor syndrome, which is characterized by self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy. These individuals are generally high performing and intelligent, but their sense of self is not fully developed.

In this sense, Barry, Berg and Chandler (2006) talk about a specific type of identity built on these (self) limitations exposed by the academics themselves. It is an identity of a fragile and fragmented nature, called *Academic Chamaleon*. In this type of professional identity, there is a balance between tasks with a preference for research, although teaching predominates due to insecurity. This leads to changing gender identities, which causes stress and eventual abandonment of research. This aspect is mainly due to the stress and insecurity generated by 1) facing a predominantly male classroom; 2) the anxiety of comparisons with their male colleagues; and 3) the fear of not meeting the desired expectations (Wilinson, 2018).

Angervall (2016) further explored this particular issue. Her findings indicated that the participants saw teaching assignments as important in the academic career, but also as a trap that holds them back from advancing their research. Several of them expressed that teaching consumed their time and energy for other opportunities in their progress since it takes time away from producing research. However, some of them see

teaching as a place where people actually collaborate rather than compete and find alternative career strategies. Still, these women seem to be trapped in their careers, which may be related to gender, and the experience of the "inability" to find directions in a more competitive structure.

In line with the latter, Healey and Davies (2019) reported in their research how women paid more attention to teaching than to research issues. Inevitably, this reduces the time they have available to produce the 'accounting' publications emphasized through research evaluation exercises. As a consequence, it has a negative impact on academic rank (Santos and Dang, 2019). However, there is another important explanation behind this imbalance. According to Santos and Dang (2019), this imbalance is also due to prevalence of women in inferior university ranks with greater teaching loads.

Throughout the selected studies, feelings and emotions linked to fear, stress and insecurity were highly commented. However, in a study by Driscoll et al. (2009), it became evident how in peer tutoring programmes female academics reconverted their identities towards values of determination, security and trust. As a result, these findings highlighted the value of teamwork and collaboration in achieving a strong and reinforced professional identity.

Research on the professional identity of female academics has also pointed to external barriers that slow and hinder their progress. The results of the research carried out by Thomas and Davies (2002) reveal that in universities, management and organisation are being characterised by aspects of male discourses which have to do with an academic profile oriented towards values of competitiveness, individuality and instrumentality. As a consequence, the values associated with female discourse such as empathy, active listening or support and commitment are being forgotten. According to this author, this is why women academics feel "silenced" and marginalised. Barry, Berg and Chandler (2006) add that the attributes referred to the figure of women in academia are sometimes harmful and detrimental to the development of their work and to work-life balance. The demands of his colleagues, who seek a sympathetic female ear in times of trouble, make it difficult for her to conduct research in her workplace. As a result, participants report how this attitude contributes to emphasizing their already high levels of stress, working hours at home, and family problems.

For all these reasons, Davies et al. (2005) suggest a gender focus in academia that does not consider gender as a binary social category but as a "point of overlap". In this way, the female gender would be released from the cultural and social attributes that limit the full professional development of female academics. Thus, we would move towards a conception of female academics "out of risk".

b) Motherhood or academy? Two conflicting worlds.

Our results reveal how the new neoliberal demands have transformed family life into an impact factor for female academics (Fothergill and Feltey 2003). Specifically, pregnancy and motherhood bring about challenges, obstacles or changes in decision-making that have a direct impact on women's professional (re)construction of identity (Abetz 2019). As Engen, Bleijenbergh and Beijer (2019) point out, it is the uncertainty surrounding motherhood and the difficulty of combining family and work in academic careers that directly affects this identity construction. For this reason, the same authors admit that being both an academic and a mother is a challenge to professional identity and has great consequences for women in their work context.

Abetz's research (2019) highlights in its findings how throughout the doctoral stage of her study participants often heard negative comments about pregnancy from their peers and mentors. As a result, this meant that some of the participants considered delaying the pace of motherhood as an option, putting their professional goals first. For Allner (2018), the fear of pregnancy and children remains. For example, in her manuscript she argues how some principal researchers felt that pregnancies in their partners decreased productivity and could affect their projects, resulting in women having more difficulty accessing stable positions.

According to Caretta (2018), female academic careers, and especially those at critical and early stages, had an impact on their family relationships, on the time they spent with their children, and even on important decision-making. In this sense, for the researcher, the demands and heavy workload on women weighed heavily on even the most energetic graduate and postdoctoral students. Acker and Armenti (2007) who analysed the experiences of women in the university world, observed how their professional performances generated high levels of stress, anxiety, fatigue, tiredness, insomnia and burnout, being much more accentuated when they had young children. In addition, two trends were observed in the same research. On the one hand, the participants had children after they had consolidated their careers. And on the other hand, they had children by matching their pregnancy to academic calendars. Similarly, Wolf and Ward (2015, 2006) discuss how female academics presented concerns about when to have a baby depending on the academic year.

Fothergill and Feltey (2003), report that female academics with children in pursuit of tenure are under enormous pressure from the conflict between success in academia and at the same time as mothers, resulting in stress, fatigue and burnout. In addition, they mention the little or no institutional and political support. Coinciding with the above research, Salle, Ward and Wolf (2015), who examine the pressures experienced by academics in relation to their work and family life, discuss how participating women reported that they felt unable to take advantage of family-friendly policies.

In the face of the consequences experienced by women academics and described above, women have developed their own strategies to cope with the new management demands. For example, in the studies by Acker and Armenti (2007), female academics with children developed their own strategies in the sense of working harder to "disprove" the vision of their peers. For Engen, Bleijenbergh and Beijer (2019), the participants (academic female of different disciplines and ages with children) similarly developed their own strategies. For example, they presented optimism about combining family and academia; conforming to the dominant male discourse; finding a balance between family and academia; and fighting the unequal norms between academics with and without children. According to this study, academic females with children do not only adopt a single strategy but switch from one to another depending on the moment. In this sense, the strategy they consider the easiest to develop is that of accepting the dominant male discourse. On the other hand, fighting the unequal norms is shown to be the least practiced, and finding a balance between family and academia is the one that generates the greatest fatigue.

Finally, in the article by Fothergill and Feltey (2003), two main strategies were observed. First, "hiding" their children from their peers, and second, avoiding asking for any kind of work/life balance adjustment. This was done to avoid changing their colleagues' perception on them.

The difficult situation that academic women face in reconciling work and parenting, the consequences of this and the strategies developed to deal with them are often invisible (Nikunen 2012). In this way, there are female academics subjected to the new system, who internalise the new values of academia, leading them to avoid gender inequalities. According to Nikunen (2012) study, the majority of female academics interviewed (15 women between 26 and 62), especially the young ones considered having children as something negative because it can affect their aspirations. But while they are aware of the impact on their careers, they do not consider that gender inequalities exist in their workplace; rather, it lies in their poor choices within the freedom and flexibility that academia provides.

C) Identity metamorphosis: different paths to survive academic neoliberalism.

The third emerging topic of this systematic review refers to the profound transformation that the identities of women academics are undergoing. As a consequence, the studies that make up our review describe a wide variety of new identities which we have organised around three main groups: adaptive, resilient and submissive.

The group that we have designated as adaptive identities includes all the identities that are related to the fulfillment of the new demands of managerialism. However, this fulfillment is voluntary and is associated with a conscious and critical view of the new demands. This way of acting is justified by many authors as a means to survive and advance in the university world (Saunderson 2002; Discroll et al.2009;

Malauma, Pick and Htwe 2020; Davies et al. 2005). In this sense, Barry, Berg and Chandler (2006) and Acker and Armenti (2007) highlight as the main strategies of this group the increase in workload and especially in scientific production, understood as an increase in the number of publications. Furthermore, it is related to high levels of stress, insomnia, burnout, family reconciliation problems and the development of feelings such as fear and anxiety (Acker and Armenti 2007; Discroll et al. 2009; Grant and Elizabeth 2014; Hernández Sancho, Creus and Montané 2010; Malauma, Pick and Htwe 2020).

However, Hernández, Sancho, Creus and Montané (2010) establish that the fulfillment of the new demands is based on the need to survive in a highly masculinised higher education context. Thus, we find a group of female academics who are adapting to the new system either to avoid the social rejection that may be produced by the undervaluation of their male peers (Saunderson 2002); or to meet the expectations of these peers (Fothergill and Feltey 2003; Wilkinson 2018); or even to overcome gender stereotypes that place women in a disadvantageous and vulnerable situation (Barry, Berg and Chandler 2006).

In this line, two types of fundamental adaptation strategies are observed: building a false identity by imitating respected partners (Wilkinson 2018; Malauma, Pick and Htwe 2020); and adopting male characteristics (Barry, Berg and Chandler 2006). In short, such adaptations produce fragile identities that lead to feelings of inauthenticity, insecurity and anxiety (Wilkinson 2018).

Resistant identities were another of the identity typologies detected in our studies. These identities are characterised by opposition or rejection of the new demands of higher education, even though this may mean abandoning aspirations (Kandiko et al. 2017). This resistance may occur for two reasons: because they consider the new demands to be excessive and therefore feel unable to cope with them (Discroll et al. 2009; Wilkinson 2018); or because of the rejection of the high masculinization of academia (Malauma, Pick and Htwe 2020; Saunderson 2002).

Three different types of resistance strategies are described among the papers in this review: active struggle (Engen, Bleijenbergh and Beijer 2019); seeking employment options outside of academia (Barry, Berg and Chandler 2006); and the creation of working groups and partnerships (Discroll et al. 2009). According to Grant and Elizabeth (2014), these ways of proceeding relate to emotions such as anger, resignation, concern and even sometimes excitement.

However, Engen, Bleijenbergh and Beijer (2019) mention that the high levels of failure associated with these strategies lead to the development of another type of identity characterised by the abandonment of resistance. This identity is related to emotions such as frustration and resignation (Grant and Elizabeth 2014). In general, this group of resilient identities is characterised by a state of ongoing identity crisis (Saunderson 2002).

In the end, the group of subjects includes those identities that are characterized by an unconscious subordination to the new management demands (Nikunen 2012). This subordination is characterized by a submission to the new demands of the university without a voluntary decision on such compliance. In addition, there is no conscious and/or critical view of the new demands. According to different authors, this is due to different reasons. For Saura and Bolívar (2019), this lies in the high level of dogmatization of neoliberal values in academics, which leads to the development of subjects unaware of their submission. However, others state that it is due to the normalization of the claims or the ignorance of alternative realities to the current one (Smith, 2017; Cannizzo, 2017). As a result, this leads to the somatisation of the predominant male discourse in academia (Saunerson 2002; Engen, Bleijenbergh and Beijer 2019), which leads to an involuntary ignorance of the inequalities of the system (Kandiko et al. 2017). Consequently, we find a group of women who, far from fighting against the discriminatory principles and values of managerialism, are unconsciously shaped by them (Marine and Martinez 2018), continually blaming themselves for their failures (Nikunen 2012).

Discussion

A large body of international research has focused on the professional development of women academics, examining the different particularities of being a woman in the new management academy (Fox and Amichai-Hamburger 2001; Howe-Walsh and Turnbull 2016; Thompson 2015). For this reason, this systematic review aimed to synthesize the scientific literature that focuses on exploring the professional identity of women in a neoliberalised academy. The findings presented in the previous section provide an overview of the main characteristics of scientific production on this topic. In this section we intend to discuss the main results of this review, and also offer certain professional implications and future lines of research drawn from the studies included.

In the first section of the findings we consider several key aspects. Firstly, the exponential growth that this line of research is experiencing evidences the concern that exists about the impact of neoliberalism on academics (Trede, Macklin and Bridges 2012). Secondly, the results of the analysis of the geographical distribution of the studies reveal two key aspects: on the one hand, there is a clear predominance of scientific production in areas such as the United States and the United Kingdom. In reference to this, studies such as that of Slaughter and Cantweel (2012) argue that this could be due to a greater neoliberal tradition existing in these areas.

Despite this clear predominance, the results also highlight a great heterogeneity in terms of the geographical distribution of the other studies. In relation to this, Taylor and Lahad (2018) argue that, at present, neoliberalism is not something specific, but rather a doctrine that is widespread throughout the planet, which is why we find studies in different territories. This geographical variety is a consequence of the "neoliberal thinking turn" that took place from the 1980s onwards (Tight 2019, 3). According to Allais (2014), this "shift" was generated in many countries as a result of continued

pressure from both other neoliberal governments and supranational bodies. However, the same author also states that some countries took the "turn" voluntarily due to a double objective. On one hand, it was intended to help the growth of employment, and therefore of the economy, by improving the quality of Higher Education (Bermúdez-Aponte and Laspalas 2017). On the other hand, it helps generate a Higher Education capable of dealing with the American university world (Brøgger 2019; Tomicic, 2020).

Furthermore, in this effort to understand how female academic identities are constructed in a neoliberal world, qualitative approaches are predominant among the studies that make up our review. This may be due to the methodological suitability of this approach to investigate the most intimate and human part of the participating subjects (Bolívar and Domingo 2019).

The results of our systematic review also highlight that women academics often experience limitations that lead them to restrict optimal development of their professional identity. Multiple studies concur with our findings in pointing out how socially constructed and socially linked perceptions of women, such as motherhood, place women at a disadvantage (El-Far, Sabella, Vershinina 2020). However, these limitations are not only related to their context or environment, but are sometimes located in the very intimate and identifying dimension of their professional being. In this sense, these findings coincide with other research developed along these lines, which argues that one of the obstacles linked to the professional development of academic leaders has to do to a large extent with feelings of self-sufficiency, insecurity or lack of confidence in their own professional worth (Hoang 2013).

Despite research that mentions the various efforts being made to reduce gender inequalities in academia (Rivera 2017; Montes-López and Groves, 2019), there are still studies that show that they have not yet been eradicated (Baker 2010). In this regard, some research included in our review indicates that many factors, both internal and external, continue to hinder the academic progress of women on an equal footing with their male colleagues (Bozzon, et al. 2018; Leathwood and Read 2012). Moreover, the new neo-liberal principles of competitiveness, freedom and individualization have helped not only to perpetuate these inequalities (Blackmore 2014), but also to develop processes of individualization of responsibility in the face of failure (Davies and Bansel 2010) which contribute to the silencing and invisibility of these inequalities (Lipton 2020).

Therefore, and coinciding with our findings, studies such as that of Reay (2000) warn that, in this new academic world, some women continue to experience situations of marginalisation or isolation when deciding to become mothers (Raddon 2002) or to devote their efforts to work linked to teaching (Bingham and Nix 2010). However, as highlighted by Acker and Armenti (2007), in the face of adverse situations women find ways and means to cope and resist, mostly using values of collective commitment and "double effort". For this reason, Acker and Feuerwerker (2006) use the Jean Baker

Miller's phrase, 'doing good and feeling bad' to describe this last aspect, arguing that women academics dedicate a large part of their efforts to supporting other colleagues to move forward, as well as to combining their research and teaching tasks with motherhood and domestic life. As a result, women are forced to increase their workloads in order to respond to both family work and high professional demands, and thus avoid social rejection by their colleagues (Misra, Hickeys and Templer 2012). Moreover, according to research by Leathwood and Read (2012), these situations result in women experiencing higher levels of stress, anxiety and even burnout than their male counterparts.

This complex scenario generates an intense internal debate among academics between what is desired and what can really be achieved (Guzmán-Valenzuela and Barnett 2013). As a consequence, female academics (re)construct their professional identity. Extensive research in this area adds that, in the face of an adverse academic environment, women develop attitudes that are adaptive to the work context (Van Engen, Bleijenbergh and Beijer 2019; Tsaousi 2019). Coinciding with our findings, to adapt to the environment some women increased their work level even more in order to survive in a highly demanding world; others adopted male characteristics; some developed a false identity by imitating their male colleagues; and even others used resources such as voice modelling or clothing to develop a strong identity image that would allow them to survive in an extremely manly culture. However, other studies highlight the voices of women who showed an attitude of resistance and opposition to a neo-liberal and managerialist scenario, which did not match their professional values (Saunderson 2002). With reference to the above, we will now analyse future lines of research proposed in studies in this review in order to identify priority lines of action.

Future research

Future lines of research emerge from the selected literature. At the international level, the issue of the professional identity of women academics demands greater depth and approach. Thus, studies such as that of Hernández et al. (2010) propose to go even deeper, from an ethnographic approach, into the identity of more women who work in the world of academia in order to collect, from a more humane perspective, keys and enigmas of their professional being. Malauma, Pick and Htwe (2020) encourage the consideration of longitudinal research designs that chart the changes and key elements that shape the working trajectories of the identity of women academics. In addition, another line of interest could be how the adverse conditions highlighted in our findings (shortage of time for research, heavy teaching workload, insecurity, among others) affect the quality of work and their professional identity (Angervall 2016). In the same vein, more attention needs to be paid to the role that these and other influences play in shaping the academic life of these women. In particular, it would be interesting to investigate the identity dimension of those female academics who entered the profession at a time when being a woman in academia was uncommon (Marine and Martinez 2018).

Analyzing the impact of new policies that seek to reduce inequalities on the identities of female academics is a promising area for research (Saunderson 2002). Thus, Wilkinson (2018) encourages future researchers to explore what the political possibilities are within and outside of higher education and to identify what the challenges are for the recovery of the university as an equal and fighting place against inequality. Furthermore, Abetz (2019) indicates that it would be interesting to explore whether the problems associated with gender in academia also extend to other professional contexts.

Implications and conclusions

The scientific evidence reveals a complex situation of women in the academic world. Hence the urgency of developing equality laws in academia which minimize the impact on women's identities and preserve gender identities (Saunderson 2002). Acker and Armenti (2007) propose the establishment of policies with a family-friendly approach (family reconciliation), which seek to promote professional strategies to address inequalities, such as: the creation of working groups or mentoring (Discroll et al. 2009), the collective struggle with alternatives for change or improvement of their situation, and empowerment (Allner 2018), among others.

We believe that the voices and experiences gathered throughout the studies in this review can be very useful in visualising this problem, exposing the lights and shadows of being a woman in academia, as well as helping to normalise aspects such as motherhood in academic life in women (Abetz 2019). The conclusions of this study are valuable for understanding the slow access of women to the highest levels of higher education institutions and how the neoliberal system and individualism are part of this problem. Sensitizing the academic community to the invisible gender bias is a priority issue. Therefore, administrators must value and distribute equally the totality of roles and responsibilities of academics within departments. In this sense, research must begin to balance the other functions within and outside the labour context, thus raising a possibility of overcoming the gender inequalities silenced in this new neo-liberal system (Kandiko et al. 2017).

Finally, it is necessary to point out certain limitations in this systematic review. Throughout the search process, it is possible that some of the decisions made may be considered as limitations. For example, the databases selected or even the different filters applied may have led to the non-consideration of certain studies. However, it should be emphasized that the selection of databases was made on the basis of their scientific rigor. The aim of this decision was to ensure that the studies included met adequate scientific quality standards. However, this implies not taking into account other sources and media that could complement our literature search. On the other hand, restricting the search to only English and Spanish may also have caused some bias by omitting studies published in other languages. Finally, no examples of gray literature were included among the studies in the review, which may also be the cause of some potential bias. Despite these limitations, this study offers a qualitative synthesis from

which to develop future lines of research to understand and improve the situation of women in academia.

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