

## How Do We Make IR More Joyful?

Saara Särmä<sup>1</sup>

In the spring of 2021, I was sitting at home, but on Instagram pretended to be in Las Vegas (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hfke77gsUDA>), taking part in the ISA conference. I attended a roundtable on mentoring organized by the Committee on the Status of Women where a senior scholar said something along the lines of “if you publish 10 journal articles during your PhD, you’ll surely get a good job after you’re finished”. Yes, this may be true, but is it smart mentoring?

I can’t remember if I published any articles during the years I was writing my dissertation, maybe some in Finnish. It was hard enough as it was. Maybe I am one of those people who just “couldn’t make it in academia” - a line often heard when people talk about someone who seemed to be a promising academic but is no longer around.

I asked the roundtable in the chat whether there is space in academia for those of us who are less than superhuman. Those of us who have health or mental health issues, or other reasons that slow us down. Of course, everyone in principle thinks there’s space, or space needs to be made, yet I remain skeptical.

As a meme researcher I do appreciate a good meme and laughter is generally my coping mechanism, however I’ve become increasingly disturbed by the content my colleagues and academic friends keep sharing from the Shit Academics Say Facebook page (or Twitter account). This is one of those examples.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Saara Särmä is a feminist, an activist, an artist, and a researcher. She is the creator of “Congrats, you have an all male panel!” and co-founder of the Feminist Think Tank Hattu, which has empowered numerous women in Schools of Daring and Cursing Soirées. Currently she works at Tampere University, her postdoc project *Making Meaning out of Meme-making* is funded by the Academy of Finland (2019-2023). Saara is committed to making both academia and the world kinder and better places. She can be reached at [saara.sarma@tuni.fi](mailto:saara.sarma@tuni.fi) or on Instagram @huippumisukka



**Greg Bodwin**  
@GregBodwin



In academia you sometimes have to work 7 days a week, but the freedom to choose which 7 days is unparalleled

8:03 PM · 2021-06-25 · [Twitter Web App](#)

While I know sometimes the only thing you can do is laugh when the situation is impossible, I've begun to think that these kinds of memes just normalize a very toxic culture that is killing us slowly. And really, it might seem like a gross exaggeration to say that academia is killing us, but the effects of constant and long-term stress can be deadly.

I know it is a survival mechanism for many to laugh when faced with reality put in such a clever way. Or cry a little, sometimes even a lot. But then most just seem to move on and keep going. In the end nothing changes. Some of us give up, drop out, think that it was just me, I was too weak to make it in academia. Not smart enough, too slow a writer and thinker. Not willing to put in all the effort. Not ready to sacrifice.

Why does academia demand sacrifices? Is it really a cult as some would argue? Academia does not respect boundaries, it has no boundaries, but it cannot be up to each one of us individually to set our boundaries and do the work of maintaining them, there needs to be some other ways.

Another meme: "Adulthood is saying 'but after this week things will slow down a bit' over and over until you die" seems to accurately portray academic life. What if it really did get easier after this week, or month? What if we all just worked barely enough, and not way too much? We know we are governed into obedience, we write critically about governance, yet we are good little academic citizens and subsume to the *will to measure* that Laura writes about and produce outputs to satisfy the system. Outputs that barely anyone has time to read.

Academia is a land of many possibilities but also many impossibilities. It's such a privileged space and I feel a bit silly sometimes whining about its problems, because academia provides such

freedoms, to work whenever, wherever, on whatever topics I want. Then again, as Sámi duojár Jenni Laiti writes about art, none of us are truly free before everyone is free. Academic freedom is an illusion, because the *will to measure* constricts it... and what kind of freedom is it anyways when the longest I'm allowed to do basically whatever I want to do is 3 years (my current research funding period), and even then I have to spend months of it writing new funding applications.

Jenni Laiti writes that freedom is essentially a communal experience that arises from a sense of belonging and being seen. "Freedom means living beautifully and taking care of others and your surroundings. It means I can exist as part of my community and the world as exactly the person I define myself to be."<sup>2</sup> In the highly individualized competition that academia is, how can we live beautifully taking care of each other? Because in order to survive, I think we must learn.

Can I exist in academia as exhausted, depressed, sad, but sometimes funny, creative, and clever?  
Can I be seen as my full self?

About a year ago (Sept 3, 2020), I had asked my friends on Facebook whether one's cognitive skills will ever recover after burnout and depression. The nearly 100 answers were both hopeful and somewhat sobering. Recounting their experiences, my friends told me that it might be that full recovery will never happen, but some kind of recovery is certain. And a year from that discussion, I can tell that a lot of progress has happened, yet much remains. It might be that I just have to learn to deal with this new normal the best way I can. I was never the kind of superhuman academia wants us to be. Took me 8 years to write the dissertation. I've often felt that I'm too slow of a thinker and writer to make it in academia, yet somehow I've still stuck with it until now. But now I'm even slower and can work less hours, so where will this leave me?

Here's a radical idea, what if academia exists to serve us, not us serving it? What if people mattered more than academia? What if we are not disposable even if neoliberal academia tries to tell us otherwise? How do we take care of each other in a way that does not allow us to become disposable? Beyond writing nice comments on someone's FB post - commiserating or encouraging or both. What do we do? What do you do?

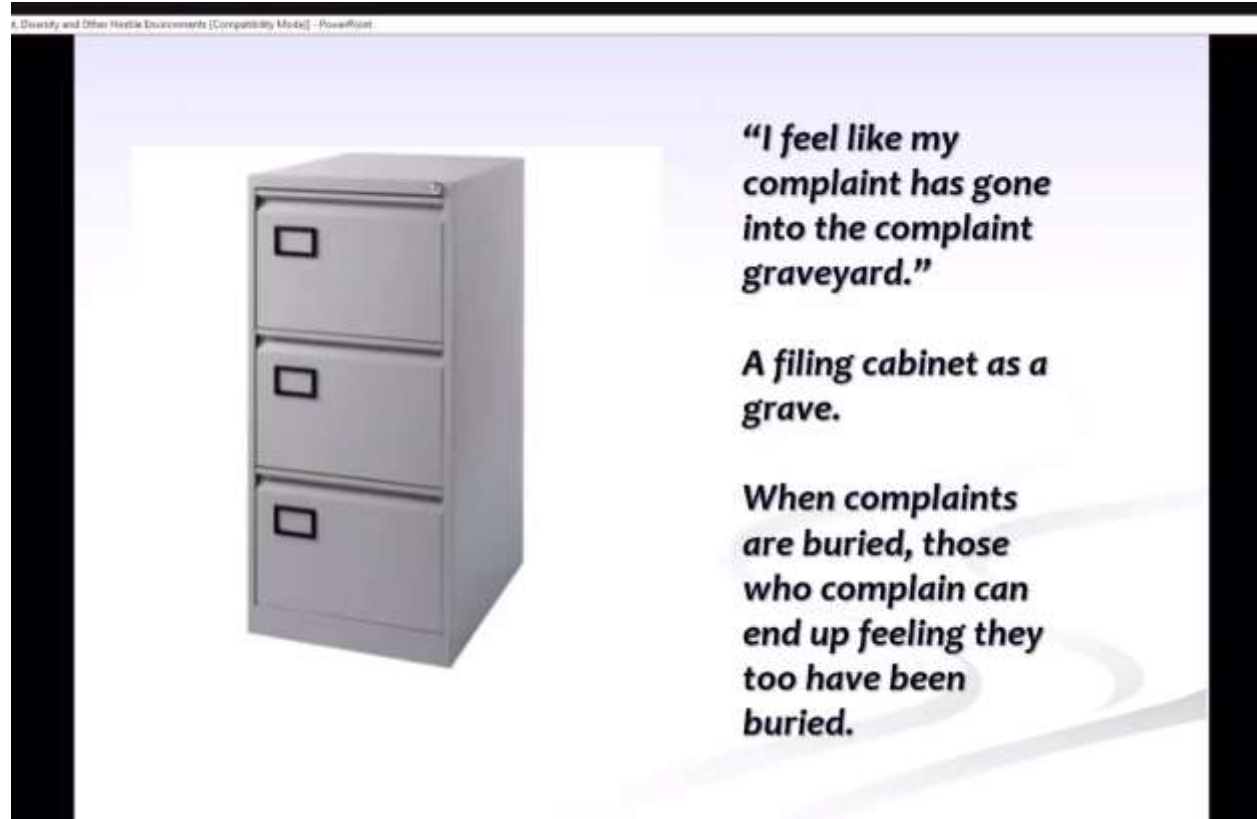
What I do, sometimes, I make collages. Here's a recent one:

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<sup>2</sup> <https://koneensaatio.fi/en/art-is-free-when-we-are-free/>



The idea for this collage came from shine choi, who asked me for some creative detoxing ideas in a sucky / sticky professional situation. She had complained about a colleague, but the complaint – after a long process – led to nothing but a managerial letter avoiding responsibility. We all know how these things most often turn out. The one who points out the problem, the one who complains, becomes the problem. And/or the issue is buried in a filing cabinet. Sara Ahmed has written extensively about this in her feminist killjoy blog and several books. shine sent me a picture of a slide from a talk by Ahmed:



I love walking in cemeteries, worked in one for a summer when I was 17. Finnish cemeteries are quite boring, most of the gravestones are of similar shape and size, black boxes, very subdued (let's not make a big number out of this – this being anything you can think of – is one of the most common sayings here). So, when shine asked about creative detoxing, my mind went immediately to building an actual grave where the complaint could be buried and making the most extravagant headstone. Or making a grave for oneself in a filing cabinet. "If your tombstone was a filing cabinet, what would you want to be found in the drawers when people go visit your grave?" Morbid much? Perhaps, but I do enjoy imagining extravagant memorial sites for myself...

However, shine did not want to deal with this only in private: "But I want it public, shared, out in the open not buried and made into my private burden" so she asked me to make a collage with unicorns, cats, glitter and laughing woman... and I did, except for the cats and unicorns. This is my attempt to help shine not feel like she's been buried along with her complaint.

It's not a very good one artistically, but that was not the aim either. Of course, it would be much more pleasing to me if it was, but collages are temporary creations, I don't throw them out and start over, I just make them. It did what it was meant to and provided shine some joy, comfort, and empowerment. She printed out a copy and stuck it on her office door. Hopefully, there will be a time when we can travel again and meet in person and she gets to have the original as well. As a

gift for her, I tried to convey in it the message that she's not alone in this, that we (the feminist we) have her back, even though there's really not much I could do institutionally or otherwise, but I can curse the injustices with her, I can be here for her.

We can measure citations, indexes etc., but this kind of emotional impact is, to me, much more important. It is the spring Laura writes about, how do we cultivate the spring so that new and wonderful things may grow? The joy of making someone else feel better, the joy of making – materially – is very different than attempting to put words on the screen. IR is what we make of it, but how do we make it more joyful?