Vol. 27, no. 2, Winter 2025

Too Smart, Too Productive, Too Much: Intellectual Vibrancy and Misogyny

Amy Robillard

Abstract: Based on interviews with 45 women and nonbinary people, this article shares the results of an analysis of the effects of being characterized as "too much" for being too smart or too productive at school or work. One of the lifelong effects of being labeled too much is a difficulty accepting compliments. This article considers that effect in depth, especially the back-handed compliment that persuades women to take on more service work in their fields.

Keywords: misogyny, too much, labor, service, compliments

Doi: 10.37514/PEI-J.2025.27.03

A couple summers ago, my husband and I spent a couple days in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, at the foot of the Smoky Mountains. We hiked during the day and, completely depleted from those hikes, visited breweries in the late afternoon. One evening, we visited a pizza place in nearby Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, a tourist town best known for Dolly Parton's theme park, Dollywood. We had to wait a little bit for our table, but as soon as we were seated, our young waiter—maybe twenty years old—came to our table, took one look at us, and said to my husband, "If she gives you any trouble or talks too much, there's an *eject* button located under your table." And then he laughed and took our drink orders without making eye contact with me. My blood pressure went up twenty points.

I told Steve we had to say something when the waiter came back. If he wasn't willing to say something, I would. Steve nodded.

When our waiter came back with our drinks, he said it again. "If she's too much, just push the *eject* button under your side of the table," he said to Steve.

"Please stop saying that," I said, barely able to contain my fury. I can't believe I said "please."

He finally looked at me, perplexed.

"Stop saying the thing about the eject button. It's incredibly misogynistic."

Amy E. Robillard is Professor of English at Illinois State University, where she teaches undergraduate courses in composition, rhetoric, and life writing. She is the author, most recently, of *Misogyny in English Departments* and, she has published a number of personal essays in non-academic outlets.

"It's mis…? I don't know that word."

I take a deep breath. Why am I not surprised? "It means you're being incredibly sexist when you say things like that and it makes me want to leave. You have to stop saying things like that about your women customers."

"Oh, I say it all the time. People laugh."

"It's not funny. You're suggesting from the get-go that women are a problem. That's misogyny."

Both times he mentioned the *eject* button, our waiter mentioned the phrase *too much*. He was working from a cultural commonplace that women are prone to emotional excess, that we talk too much, that we make things difficult for those around us because we are too much. This is an ideological belief that goes as far back as the Victorian age. In her recent book, *Too Much: How Victorian Constraints Still Bind Women Today*, Rachel Vorona Cote observes the many ways in which our culture diminishes women for their emotional excess. "To be 'too much,' as I define it, connotes a state of excess that either directly or indirectly derives from an emotional and mental intemperance: exuberance, chattiness, a tendency to burst into tears or toward what is typically labeled mental instability" (12). She notes the ways *men's* excesses are, of course encouraged, pointing to the way, for instance, a soldier's valor in battle, "achieved through intense feats of physical duress, violence, and the willingness to sacrifice oneself, has always been hailed as morally upstanding and the most preeminent index of patriotism" (8). Notably, a bifurcation exists here between women's *emotional* excesses and men's heroic excesses. Men are also expected, Cote writes, to be excessively hungry and horny (10), but women's appetites, we know, are to be denied or shrunken lest they be perceived as too much.

What we don't see in Cote's definition of too muchness is an excess of intelligence, smarts, or productivity in school or the workplace. While Cote does address workplaces, her focus in the book is on exuberance and the shame that comes from being characterized as too loud rather than the shame that comes from being told you are too smart for your own good or you are too productive. You need to just calm down, take it slower. Don't do so much. In this article, I am interested in the phrase *too much* specifically in the context of women's intelligence and productivity. I am interested in the phrase and all that surrounds it: the forms it takes in women's lives, the times it is wielded and to what effects. In what follows, I analyze interviews with forty-five women and non-binary people who have experienced the label *too much*. These women have been told they were too much at home, at school, at work, and they have been both ridiculed and taken advantage of for their smarts and their productivity. When a woman's productivity advances *her* interests, it is seen as a problem; when it advances the interests of others who don't want to do that work, it is welcome. By all means, be too much in the service of others.

Methodology

In the summer and fall of 2023, I interviewed forty-five women and nonbinary people about their experiences with the label *too much*. I wanted to understand who called them too much, in what contexts participants' responses to being called too much, the effects, short-term and long-term, of being called too much, and how all of this connects to the logic of misogyny. In addition, I wanted to expand the research beyond the academy; of the forty-five people I interviewed, ten, or twenty-two percent, are not academics. The average age of interviewees was 45. Five, or eleven percent, are BIPOC.[1] All names in this article are pseudonyms.

Thirteen of the forty-five participants I interviewed remarked at some point on the phenomenon of *feeling seen* by the call I'd put out asking for volunteers in July 2023. Even as I was shaping the call, I realized that in order to participate in the research, volunteers would have to self-identify as being too much and that doing so might prevent some people from contacting me. Sensitive to this, I wrote, at the top of the call, "All my life I've been told I'm too much." I wanted this line to resonate with people. And it did.

"So much of my inner life has been and continues to be affected by self-policing to avoid being 'too much' that I wanted to volunteer to be interviewed for your study, but even this late in life (age 58), it's such a painful experience that I realized that I can't talk about it," one woman wrote to me. She did not sit down for an interview with me. Another woman wrote in an email, "I saw your call for participants, and I have rarely felt so seen. I welled up as I read it, because I felt like someone finally gets how I have felt my entire life." This sense of recognition underscores how deeply ingrained and universal this experience is for many women. From being told they were "too smart for their own good" to being perceived as having too many opinions in their professional lives, these women found an opportunity to voice a lifelong struggle.

By acknowledging this shared experience in my call for participants, I tapped into a collective narrative that resonated strongly with many women. The feeling of being seen suggests that for many, this was one of the first times they had been invited to reflect on and share the full arc of their experiences with the *too much* label. The call for participants provided validation for feelings and experiences that many had internalized and, perhaps, never fully articulated. These interviews, unlike their homes, schools, and workplaces, were spaces free of judgment.

I primarily asked interviewees to tell me stories about times in their lives when they were characterized as some form of too much. What happened? Who said it to them? How did they respond and how has it affected them since? As I did in *Misogyny in English Departments*, I ground these stories in a theory of precarious narratives. "Narratives, like lives, are differently precarious. A narrative becomes particularly precarious when its support is in question: a narrative becomes more precarious when others do not tell the same kind of story or when others question the truth value of one's story" (8). The more stories told about our experiences being labeled *too much*, the less precarious each story becomes, and the more able others

are to share their stories of being labeled *too much*. Together, these stories move from individual stories to a collective, one that accomplishes the social and rhetorical work of refusing the label *too much*. This article is one part of a larger project and will join together with future work to build an even larger collective of stories of the power of women speaking out together about being labeled *too much*.

Of the types of too much I coded for in the data, sixteen out of eighteen are what I'm calling outward-oriented characteristics, or those that involve a woman putting something into the world, with the top two being talking too much and being too emotional. Only two of eighteen are what might be characterized as taking in too much: too fat and too needy. This suggests, of course, that women are characterized as too much far more often for their production—you might even say their giving—than for their taking or their appetites. This makes sense according to the logic of misogyny. Though women are expected to give, it's *what* they're supposed to give that matters in a patriarchy. They are supposed to give, for instance, attention, and when they are talking, they are not giving attention. Likewise, when they are understood to be too needy, they are seen as taking, which is, according to the logic of misogyny, a punishable offense.

When I say the logic of misogyny, I draw on Kate Manne's work in *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, where she writes that in a patriarchy, men are entitled to *receive* and women are obligated to *give*. The passage that is burned into my brain from Manne's book is this one:

> Women may not be simply human *beings* but positioned as human *givers* when it comes to the dominant men who look to them for various kinds of moral support, admiration, attention, and so on. She is not allowed to *be* in the same ways as he is. She will tend to be in trouble when she does not give enough, or to the right people, in the right way, or in the right spirit. And, if she errs on this score, or asks for something of the same support or attention on her own behalf, there is a risk of misogynist resentment, punishment, and indignation. (*Down* xix)

When women do not give what is expected of them—feminine-coded goods such as affection, attention, care, loyalty, and nurture—or when they ask for any of those things or for masculine-coded goods such as respect, compensation, or power—they are liable to be shocked back into their place with any number of "down-girl" moves.

> Girls and women may be down-ranked or deprived relative to more or less anything that people typically value…. This may happen in numerous ways: condescending, mansplaining, moralizing, blaming, punishing, silencing, lampooning, satirizing, sexualizing, belittling, caricaturizing, exploiting, erasing, and evincing pointed indifference. (*Down* 30)

When participants in this research found themselves in a position in which *they* possessed the masculine-coded goods such as intellect and productivity and they were in a position to earn respect as a result—in other words, when the traditional patriarchal tables were turned—they found themselves receiv-

ing the message that being smart and doing a lot of work were, actually, not positive attributes. They were, instead, opportunities for questioning and shame.

I was on the edge of this work when I wrote *Misogyny in English Departments*. In that book, I wrote that, when she is "in her place," a woman "does not have opinions. She does not ask for feedback on her work if she is a student. She does not attempt to make suggestions about her area of academic expertise. She does not call out anybody in her department, most especially her chairperson, for lying. She does not take credit for her work. She does not try to change things" (72). When she is not in her place, of course, she is challenging what Manne characterizes as men's epistemic entitlement (*Entitled* 141), the "unwarranted sense of entitlement on the part of the mansplainer to occupy the conversational position of the *knower* by default: to be the one who dispenses information, offers corrections, and authoritatively issues explanations" (*Entitled* 140). While Manne is writing about mansplaining here, it is easy enough to extend her point to the work I am doing here; when women demonstrate expertise or are immensely productive at work or school, they risk unseating men from their default positions of authority.

The surveillance of "too much" in childhood and education

One of the biggest differences between this project and my earlier project on misogyny in English departments is that this one involves a label that has been attached to women and girls, in so many cases, from the time they were children. Their parents and teachers told them they were too much from the time they were 3, 5, 8 years old. The impacts of this label have been lifelong. So when I put out a call for volunteers to participate in this research project, I was asking for women to come forward with stories not just about their experiences in their workplaces (as I had with the English department research) but also their experiences in their homes as young children and in school. The people I spoke with have been hearing *all their lives* that they are too much. This belief about too-muchness becomes deeply internalized, shaping self-perception in profound ways. When I asked women about their responses to being characterized as too much, they report internalizing shame ("Shame. A lot of shame. It's like I had this happy giant balloon and somebody puts a pin in it and now I'm Eeyore with nothing." "Especially when I was younger, it was a lot of shame and fear."), shrinking ("When I was young, it was trying to be less. Just like trying to keep it in." "When I was younger, it was to shrink. It was to become less." "For so long it was to box myself, to try to make myself smaller."), and shutting down ("In the past I think I very much internalized it and shut down and was like, oh, that is true, of course I don't deserve to ask for those things." "Typically and especially when I was younger it was shutting down and sort of being like, you're right and using that to push things back down and try not to be as much." "My knee-jerk reaction when they mean it with mal intent is to shut down."). All of these responses have multifaceted effects on one's capacity to develop socially and emotionally.

The kinds of too much participants talked about are many: they have been told that they talk too much, that they feel too much, that they are too curious, that they ask too many questions, that they are too adventurous, that they are too loud, that they are too fat, too tall, too big. They take up too much space, they

have too many ideas, they are too opinionated. They are too logical, too caring, they have too much energy, they spend too much time in their rooms. They are too happy, too proud, too committed. They smile too big, showing too many teeth.

What's more, the surveillance of too much begins early. It begins early and it shapes little girls' and then adolescents' and then women's behavior as it highlights all the things that are too big. The surveillance of too much settles in even before little girls begin school. "Some of my first memories as a child were being told I was too much," said one participant when I asked her when she first remembers being told she was too much. "I knew all of those messages before I was five," says another. "When I was three, my grandmother used to tell me that I was too smart for my own good." This participant, now 63 years old, says, "I think about that so often." "I don't feel like I have a memory before that," says another. Age 3, age 5, age 8, age 9, age 10. Morgan recalls that they heard it in kindergarten. "I was in a small group, and I was running ahead of everyone in everything, and it was a chastisement of getting too far ahead. That is Morgan being too much right now. Morgan, you need to calm down. 'Too much' and 'calm down' in my mind are so completely connected." In Morgan's story we see that they are being called too much because they are running too far ahead. They are too quick. They are too smart. They are too much for school.

Three of my interviewees told me stories about being too much for school. Like Morgan, Grace, an associate professor of English, tells me that in the space of the classroom, where she was always tracked in honors classes, she was always bored and so she was always doing too much.

I distinctly remember a teacher in middle school telling me—even though I sat in the front row and I paid attention and I did well—I think I had a 98 at the end of the year, and this was a high school-level class that I was taking when I was twelve—that I was drawing too much. I remember being told by my teacher who I otherwise liked and had a nice rapport with, that when I was a famous fashion designer, he would say that I was in his class, but for the moment could I please stop drawing instead of doing the work. Except I was doing the work. I was also drawing.

Then there's Charlotte, a content strategist, who tells a story about being too much for her AP Psychology teacher in high school.

> I would find inconsistencies between, like, the school materials and our textbook or like what the teacher was saying about some sort of theory or framework or concept and I would be like, hey, that's not exactly what this says, can you help. I don't know how to say, can you help me understand, but that's the polite way to say, you're full of shit. I don't know exactly how I would word it, but I would point out that I was confused by misleading language or things that were conflicting and I would be sent to the principal's office. That was my AP Psychology class and literally after a certain point I was told not to go to the class anymore. I just went and did the work in the principal's office.

And finally there's Nicole, a labor studies professor, whose story is eerily similar to Charlotte's.

> When I was in high school, I had a math teacher who was ex-military, ex-Marine, and we didn't mesh, let's just go with our personalities were quite different and I was always the person who was like, I think you skipped a step there, how did you do that? I have a question about this and everyone else is kinda sleeping through class, right, and so I remember that he put something on the board and he explained the answer and it was wrong. It was absolutely just incorrect. So I didn't say it during class, but I went afterwards and I was like, that wasn't the right answer, and he lost it on me. He was like, why do you just always have to be asking questions and correcting things, in this over-the-top military sort of way that was just, as a teenage girl, crushing to me. I just started crying…. Later, he was like, I think that was completely inappropriate, she can't come back to my class. I was a sophomore. That's the last year of math I took in high school. I did correspondence math after that because I was in a small rural high school. That was the only math teacher and he didn't want me back and by that point I was like, I don't want to see him because it's so upsetting…. He was like, without mincing words, you are always just too much. That's what he was saying and the words he was using.

Grace, Charlotte, and Nicole were all good students. Grace's infraction was that she was understood to not be paying attention, while Charlotte and Nicole were pointing out inconsistencies between what they had learned and what was happening in front of them in the classroom. For this, both Charlotte and Nicole were punished with exile from the class itself. If we think about what Charlotte and Nicole were doing by the lights of misogyny, we can see they each put their teacher, a figure of authority, into a position in which they could be humiliated. Perhaps, for these male teachers, having a mistake pointed out *by a girl* was humiliating and they felt the need to respond by banishing the offender from class.

In her essay, "'Put on the Diamonds': Notes on Humiliation," Vivian Gornick writes that "Nothing, nothing, nothing in the world can destroy the soul as much as outright humiliation. Every other infliction can eventually be withstood or overcome, but not humiliation." But what humiliates you is not the same as what humiliates me. Humiliation is a result of an absence of self-respect, and, as Gornick puts it, the "circumstances that can make people feel bereft of [self-respect] are as variable as persons themselves." But I want to suggest that for those of us in the knowledge business—teachers, writers, academics—circumstances that make us feel bereft of self-respect and thus humiliated are those in which our intellect is called into question. Even more, circumstances in which an authority based on our intellect, is called into question. Thus, it makes perfect sense that Charlotte's and Nicole's teachers banished them from class. One's inclination, Gornick explains, when one's right to exist is challenged, is "to crawl out from under the rock that held their prodigious capacity for shame in place, and stand up shooting."

The surveillance of "too much" at work

From the stories women told about doing too much work or having too many ideas at work, the theme of humiliation emerged rather quickly: humiliation for doing too much but also the belief that you're doing too much is humiliating others by making them look inadequate. This belief is dependent on a culture of comparison and competition, of one-upmanship and zero-sum games. A woman's productivity becomes a problem when she is winning the competition.

Jordan, an associate professor of English, tells me about a "waste-of-space male professor" in her department "who very much has asked not to be on committees with me because he does nothing and I do a lot, so I think there is some of that, I think I highlight the ways he is a waste of space." Nicole's colleagues are more direct with her. She tells me, "I've been in situations where people are not working at that speed and not taking on these projects and not traveling as much and not going and they're like, why don't you just keep it down for the rest of us who are just kind of getting by?" Asked about what she believes is the tipping point for being perceived as too much, Stacey, a professor of political science, says, "I think with men in the work environment the tipping point is if I seem to be making them—they perceive that my success or my participation makes them look weak." Natalie, a creative writing professor, tells me about how she perceives the differences between her motivation and her colleagues' motivations for getting work done:

> So I was doing too much… I was really passionate. It's a theme, actually, that goes back to my high school and college, I pursue things because I'm really passionate about them, so that fuels me doing them and working on them. Whereas my colleagues—actually as I'm talking to you about it, it feels so much like high school—are just like, well I'm gonna do this to check off the box. And if you're motivated by checking off the boxes then you don't like to do it and you don't do as much and I understand that but I wasn't motivated at the time by checking off the boxes, I was passionate about what I was doing, so I was doing a lot of it. And again, it was like, that's too much…

When I asked Natalie what she believes is the tipping point for being perceived as too much, she echoed what Stacey said. "Apparently as long as I don't call attention to myself and as long as it doesn't look like I'm doing much more than anyone else, I'm fine. But if I start doing that, then that was the tipping point. I had a male colleague at the time who had published fifteen books—nobody cared. But with me, everyone turned against me. They automatically assumed—not everyone, but many, many people, they automatically assumed that if I was doing all that, never mind that I was doing it over fifteen years, that I must be getting away with something."

Maya, a healthcare professional, has been told by others in her workplace that she does too much and that she expects too much from others. "The message I heard was to 'dial it back' and let other people do it," she tells me. "The problem is that my expectations are too high and I should not take over projects just because I don't like the way others do it. The problem is that I don't see these projects moving forward

at all." After her latest performance review, Maya says, "It has become clear to me that most people just want to do the minimum and when I come in and propose change, people do not like it."

Similarly, Eileen, an architect, tells me about needing to coddle the male engineers she worked with lest they take offense at what she told them to be true.

> I had to review drawings, and one engineer told me—I would say, this conflicts with this wall or, you know, fire vamp needed here or whatever—and he's like, you can't tell engineers what to do. You have to just say that you think it's not right. Like I was being too aggressive to actually call attention and do my job. So that's the kind of thing I ended up with. I mean, I just couldn't interpret it any other way, that, as a woman, I was too much. Like, I had to couch everything in my emails, you know, lest I seem too pushy, you know. Too pushy, too loud, too domineering, I guess.

Brooke, an associate professor of English, tells a story, too, about having too much information and not being heard, and being discounted in the workplace. Having "rung the bell" five years earlier about the problems with funding teaching assistantships in the department, Brooke notes that her chair didn't listen. Didn't see the problem.

> I told them multiple times, but what I ended up with was, well, you just got overworked and you're really very angry, so let us handle it and you just go write your book. Having too much information, too much understanding, taking the actual time to give a crap about this department—it was too much. In fact, I shared this data at a faculty meeting and I had this male faculty member—we're friendly, we've been out to dinner, we're not BFFs—he looked at me and he said, "I just don't believe those numbers. I just don't think you're accurate." And I'm like, here's my citations. This is where I got it. It's available, you could go look for it yourself. He's like, "Yeah, I just don't believe it." So being too much, having too much understanding, then makes you easily discounted apparently.

Just *knowing* things, understanding them, is seen as too much in some work spaces. Knowing more than the men in those same work spaces threatens to humiliate them. One aspect of the patriarchy that Manne's work makes quite clear is that men are entitled to masculine-coded perks and privileges such as "social status, prestige, rank, and the markers thereof," but also that they are entitled to the *absence* of shame and humiliation (113). This is a perk that women's knowledge and productivity threaten.

At the same time, so many women told me that their too-muchness at work is perfectly fine when it can be taken advantage of. Jennifer, an academic administrator, says,

> What ends up happening in my experience when you're too much is people don't like you, but they know you do the work, so I get a lot…. I was chair of the college-wide curriculum committee as an

> untenured faculty member because you're too much until people need stuff done and then, all of a sudden, you're not too much. How about doing this, and this, and this?

Jennifer tells me that she perceives the requests to do more and more and more as a kind of misogynist punishment. "There's a punishment of more. You need to do more. Okay, so do this and do this and do this." For her supervisor, also a white woman, Jennifer believes she was too much. "I had too many ideas. I was too efficient. I was too good at what I did, and she punished me. I mean, like physically moved my office, punished me, to a closet."

Lily, a graduate program coordinator, observes a similar phenomenon in her line of work. "In leadership, I think it's mostly been embraced especially because sometimes professionally it's hard to find people who want to do the work. So they're like, oh, we're happy that you like too much work, right? Like, we're good with it." Brooke makes a similar point when she says, "It's okay if you're too much in the service of other people—if you're working sixty hours a week as the grad director or associate chair, that is perfectly great. Be too much. Be all in everyone's face." Alison, an associate teaching professor, says, "It's funny because I think that as a person who's too much I'm someone who's relied on heavily to get shit done. Nobody has to worry that they have to follow up with me or do any of these things. So I'm kind of like, why the critique if you're so reliant on me to be this way?" Cote, the author of *Too Much: How Victorian Constraints Still Bind Women Today*, might respond that, "when in the service of a capitalist hegemony, they [our excesses] may be overlooked or excused—even when, in certain cases, they ought not to be—and sometimes they may even be encouraged" (12).

There's a fine line, though, one women must not cross, between being too much in the service of others and being *proud* of that work. That, too, is too much. Suppress those positive emotions. Says Tori, "I was told by my father that I made people uncomfortable, that I had to rein myself in and control what I showed of my intelligence or what I showed of my talents because other people would feel insecure around me, that I was showing them up, that I had a lot of—that taking pride in my work, being good at something and being proud of it was a bad thing. Because that would make other people feel bad."

So a woman's pride in something she's good at has the potential to make others around her feel badly about themselves. This schooling starts young. Tracy tells me this about her family dynamics when she was a child:

> I couldn't outshine my brother. I was often labeled too much because I was a showoff. I was smart, I was loud, I liked attention, I was tall, and I often overshadowed my brother. I wasn't ever punished for being too smart on its own, but if I showed any happiness about it or I talked about it, I was a showoff. It wasn't the fact that I was smart, it was that I found *happiness* in that. I think girls and women are called too much when they are happy, especially when they are happy about anything that might be about themselves.

Women and girls internalize the message early that they are not supposed to be happy about the things they are good at, and they are instead supposed to approach what they do with some level of remove. Natalie says she hears "calm down" a lot at work and, "it's often because I'm excited in a good way, like I get overly happy and excited about a situation even at work and people are like, what is with you? If something seems really good, I don't hold back. I get treated like, why are you doing this, why are you acting this way?" One of Tracy's final statements to me really stings: "I was terrified of being made fun of for being happy."

Effects of being characterized as too smart and too productive

As I mentioned above, women internalize the label "too much" and it begins to have pernicious effects on their self-perception. We just heard Tracy tell us that she grew up "terrified" of showing happiness for fear she would be made fun of, for she understood happiness to be a kind of too much. Internalized effects of being told one is too much again and again at school and at work include self-doubt, self-policing, and anxiety. Externalized effects include lost job opportunities, convoluted communication in the workplace, and being ignored or cut out of important meetings and decisions.

Kerry tells me about "having to put up a bit of a shield" in the workplace because she knows that whatever she tries to do, be it in leadership or in advocacy, she knows she's going to get a response in which she is labeled too much. "Whether it's like, oh, that's too much for us to discuss right now or that's not on the table or you need to tone that down or if you would address that issue in a different way, right. Knowing that there are gonna be all these different ways that you're gonna be told that what you're asking is too much or how you're asking is too much." Charlotte describes a "constant self-doubt that conflicts with the confidence that I naturally have about my work." She tells me about how she feels like she has to

> constantly question myself and then question the risks of communicating what I'm thinking. If one more person on earth tells me to pick my battles, we're gonna burn it down. It's not a battle. I'm not fighting with you! I'm trying to understand how we can make this better. It's not a battle. Communication and dialogue is not conflict. That is the biggest thing. You have to literally edit yourself every step of the way during your day when you're working in order to not be perceived as combative.

In Charlotte's words we hear echoes of Eileen being cautioned against telling engineers what to do; such a move would have gotten her labeled as too pushy or too aggressive. Similarly, Lily describes a "self-policing" she can feel taking over her in the workplace. "It never goes away. Like, you don't unlearn it." Alison tells me that she spends a lot of time just worrying about being perceived as too much. "You know, like, going back and reading emails I sent." Having been labeled too much for so long leads women to expect it from others, and this shapes their behavior in the workplace.

Stacey also names anxiety as an effect of being characterized as too much. But the anxiety came not just from the label, but from the way others treated her because they perceived her as too much. She tells me,

"I think I was a threat, and I don't know why, to the men in the department. Because they expected me to be subservient and follow what they wanted done or they expected me to fail. Either scenario was fine with them, but I wasn't doing either. So they were coming after me, making up rumors about me, gaslighting me. I had panic attacks before meetings. I was a mess. I was a big mess." Stacey also points to the ways she has been ignored at work. "I think there's a way in which people just don't acknowledge you. One of my professors once said in politics if you want to kill something, if you want it to go away, like a terrorist movement or something, you don't give it any attention. One of the responses is to starve me." Relatedly, Nicole describes being cut out of important decisions completely when three older white men in her previous department "completely left me off emails."

Both Jennifer and Tori describe lost job opportunities as a result of being labeled too much. Jennifer tells me, "I think I've lost job opportunities because of it—I'm pretty positive I have—and I know I probably have lost out on fellowships or grants—maybe opportunities that people didn't recommend me for, I'm sure I have…. But if I would have been just a little bit less good at what I do, it could easily have been used against me. I have to perform at a very high level so it's not used against me. At least, that's how I feel. There's no room for error." Tori tells me about a previous career in software development that did not advance as far as it could have because men ran out of patience with her. She was perceived as too ethical for the CEO and "opportunities were closed to me. It's a significant financial loss, which I've never talked about."

Something Kendra said sticks with me as I think about what is lost when women are continuously criticized for being too good at what they do:

> The ways in which I'm too much—another one is too passionate. You're too passionate about this work. I can't help it. I don't have another way to be. It's not like I decide which Kendra I'm gonna put on in the morning. That aspect of my personality has been very consistent…. I think the aggregate message of, there is something wrong with you because you don't comply, fit this, you're too much, I think the aggregate message contributes to anxiety and sleeplessness and pushing myself past the point of my own wellbeing and taking on too many things.

As I noted above, most of the women I spoke with have been hearing that they are too much since they were children. I appreciate Kendra's observation about the aggregate effects of being characterized as too much; we are not talking about one time. We are talking about a lifetime. We are talking about home and school and work and everything in between. Too much becomes a cloak women are unable to remove.

On taking compliments

Though I did not pose it this way in the interviews, another effect of being labeled too much is a difficulty accepting compliments. I asked participants how they respond to compliments because I suspected that women who have been characterized as too much all their lives would not be very good at accepting compliments because they do not enjoy being the center of attention—because attention, in a patriarchy, is what women are supposed to *give*, not receive. And for the most, part, I was right. But it's also true that many women spoke about being particularly uncomfortable taking compliments about their work. While they may be able to take compliments about something superficial, such as an article of clothing, taking a compliment about their work is more difficult. Sonia, an associate professor of English, for instance, says, "I hate it. I'm so bad at it. If it's about my clothes, I tell them where I got them. I got it on sale….That I can handle. I like your glasses—that's fine. If people compliment my work, it's very uncomfortable for me. Even though it's gratifying. Send me an email about it—love that. Text me about it, great. But tell me in person and I just deflect it." Sadie tells me that she, too, would tell someone what she paid for the skirt they just complimented, but if someone complimented a piece of her writing, "that doesn't feel possible that I could receive a compliment on something like my writing. So then I have to talk about how it's really just a steaming pile of shit. Like, you're just saying that because you're my friend. Because I talk too much, I would have to give you a long-winded explanation." Cassandra, a college student, tells me that she diminishes compliments completely. "I don't take compliments well. I am very self-critical. I think my work and my products are an extension of myself and if I'm calling myself into question then I'm constantly questioning my work." *If I'm calling myself into question*, Cassandra says.

But in so many of the cases that I've shared here, we see that it's others calling women and their work products into question. Calling them into question because their productivity and their good ideas threaten others in the work space. So we can see the way that these beliefs become internalized. As one participant, Kate, a prisoners' rights advocate, puts it, "I ignore them. [Taking compliments] is standing out and calling attention—the opposite of the lifetime of work, hard work I have devoted to being smaller, quieter, and unseen." When you're called too much again and again, you become persuaded that your work is not worth taking credit for. You deflect a compliment. You say it wasn't all you. It was the team. Jordan tells me, "I keep saying, oh, it's the students, the students did the posters, the students did the work, go compliment the students. I'm always like, well, thank you, it was a lot of work, but it was worth it and look at the students—like deflecting that way." And here's Sonia again: "I write a lot of collaborative things, so if people compliment my research, I can always be like, oh, well, it wouldn't have been as good without these other folks. I just make it about the group."

Many women talked about the ways they have found themselves needing to "train" themselves to take compliments more graciously or to "practice" getting "better" at receiving compliments. For instance, Kerry, a professor of English, says, "I've had to teach myself to not just downplay. I'm very uncomfortable with compliments." Charlotte says, "I've been getting better. I've been able to be like, oh, thank you so much,

that really means a lot, or yeah, I've really been working on that or I love that you say that, thank you for recognizing that this is something that's important to me." Tori tells me, "I have trained myself to say, thank you, I appreciate that, or thank you, that means a lot to me." Similarly, Natalie says, "I have started to train myself because I think it's important to respond to them in a positive way." Brooke tells me, "I've been trying to be better. I've been trying to take them, to start a different conversation. It used to be I would make excuses for why I had the complimentary thing and it has everything to do with trying to be small. I don't want to walk into a space and have all the attention."

It is not hard to see a through-line from being told you cannot take pride in your work or your intellect to being unable to accept a compliment for that same work or intellect. "One of the characteristics of a woman that's too much in my head is a woman who is too self-involved or self-absorbed so I worry all the time that I am going to come across as being selfish or too self-absorbed," Tracy tells me. Lauren, a doctoral student in rhetoric and composition, explains,

> I think I have something in my brain that won't let me believe them [compliments]. So, while I might tell you, Oh, Amy, my first year as a PhD student, I got a short story published, that was really cool, I got a 4.0, which was really hard to do, I made new friends, I got a book chapter proposal accepted, right—and those four things are all things that actually happened, I can tell you those thing with excitement and not feel a sense of accomplishment or joy. And then if you compliment me on those things, it's just, I can't hold on to it. It's like gas. It's like a gaseous substance. And I'm working on that. That's something I have to work on.

It's like a gaseous substance, Lauren says. It evaporates. Women hear it and it just disappears. It has nothing to stick to. No belief in the value of one's work.

And then there is the backhanded compliment, the one that is designed to encourage women to do more of the kind of work that so many men do not want to do. Brooke identifies that kind of compliment as, "You're so good at that, you should really do it." This kind of compliment is what we might call the flip side of learned incompetence—if I don't know how to do it, I won't have to. The backhanded compliment in the context of the workplace is designed to get women to do more service work. As I wrote in *Misogyny in English Departments*, "What is most notable about the ways women are expected to give in the realm of academic service is that it is simply *expected* that they will do it and they will do it well; at the same time, it is simply *expected* that men will not do it and that when they do it, they will do it poorly" (45). Brooke also said, in the context of department service, "I'm like, dude, just because I have the capacity to be chair does not mean I want or need it in my life."

The message to women in the workplace is this: Do enough work that we can take advantage of it, but not so much that you make others look bad. But—and this is an important *but*—it's not just any work that we want to take advantage of, as my interviewees have demonstrated. It is *service work*. Do all the

administrative work you want. Take on the role of curriculum coordinator, of graduate director, of writing program administrator. Put your too much to work for the department in any of these ways and we will take full advantage. As Kendra, a linguist, puts it, "People tell me I'm too cerebral, too smart, too intellectual, but like everywhere I go, that translates into, hey, we got a job for ya. If we can parlay your too-muchness to our advantage, we will gladly do so." You will be characterized as too much when your critical work, your scholarship, is so abundant that it makes others around you feel or look inadequate. This applies to academia, sure, but it also applies to industry, according to my interviewees.

A lifetime of being insulted, of being characterized as too much, leads, for so many women, to an inability to accept compliments. This is not surprising. When girls and young women are persuaded to believe that accepting compliments about their smarts or being proud of their intellect will make others—boys and men—"feel bad" and they have simultaneously grown up in a culture that persuades them to believe that preventing boys and men from feeling bad is their priority, they will be less inclined to accept compliments about the products of their intellect. They will find themselves in the position of having to "train" themselves to accept compliments about their work. They will need to be on the lookout for back-handed compliments meant to lure them into more service work that men do not want to do.

In her book, *On Gaslighting*, Kate Abramson writes about the characteristic phrases of gaslighting such as "crazy," "paranoid," and "acting out" that function evaluatively and "communicate both that the person is not psychologically well and that there is something morally objectionable about her perspective, attitudes, or behavior" (119-20). I would add *too much* to this list. When we label a woman *too much*, we evaluate her as a party to excess, as someone who is psychologically unwell as a result of that excess. Drawing on the work of P. F. Strawson, Abramson writes,

> Think about the stance we adopt toward someone we think of as seriously psychologically unwell. A central feature of this stance is the overwhelming tendency to see those who are psychologically unwell as beyond the reach of reason and the condition with which they're afflicted as an excusing one, or at least potentially so. We adopt what Strawson calls the "objective stance" toward them—we see them as an object of "treatment," someone to be "managed or handled or cured or trained."

Women as objects of treatment, as persons to be managed or handled or cured or trained. This is exactly what the *too much* label accomplishes, as we see with my experience in the Tennessee pizza parlor. Even more seriously, though, the *too much* label pathologizes aptitude, capacity, potential, and women's mere existence. We must share stories of the ways we are diminished in our everyday lives so that others might see themselves in them; we must make way for more stories, making them less precarious as we go.

Works Cited

Abramson, Kate. *On Gaslighting*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2024.

Cote, Rachel Vorona. *Too Much: How Victorian Constraints Still Bind Women Today*. New York: Hachette, 2020.

Gornick, Vivian. "'Put on the Diamonds': Notes on Humiliation." *Harper's Magazine,* October 2021.

Manne, Kate. *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*. New York: Oxford, 2018.

---. *Entitled: How Male Privilege Hurts Women*. New York: Crown, 2020.

Robillard, Amy E. *Misogyny in English Departments*. New York: Peter Lang, 2023.