

Running Head: COPING AND READJUSTMENT

Coping Strategies and Readjustment of Priorities in Response to
Cumulative Strain Among US PETE Faculty Members

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Abstract

Physical education teacher education faculty members navigate complex and often competing expectations related to their roles which can contribute to sustained emotional exhaustion and burnout. Recently, further attention has been given to the ways in which employees recalibrate their engagement with work in response to ongoing strain; however, little is known about how this phenomenon manifests within physical education teacher education. This qualitative study explored how faculty members in the US experience and respond to the strain they experience as part of their professional responsibilities. Findings indicate that faculty members experienced cumulative emotional exhaustion associated with role overload, blurred work–life boundaries, and sociopolitical pressures within academic environments. Participants described engaging in adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies, including boundary setting, selective disengagement from non-evaluative labor, and a recalibration of professional priorities.

Keywords: Burnout, cumulative strain, emotional exhaustion, faculty socialization

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Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE) faculty members have many responsibilities, including teaching (i.e., contributing to the educational mission of higher education through formal and informal instruction and mentorship), research (i.e., scholarly activities aimed at generating and applying new knowledge), and service (i.e., engagement with institutional, community, and professional activities that apply expertise; Graber et al., 2020). These responsibilities often blur the boundaries between work and home life, contributing to prolonged strain and feelings of being overwhelmed (Richards, Ison, et al., 2022). Professionals across many fields experience competing demands, protracted exposure to excessive workloads, and boundary erosion which can lead to burnout, a condition characterized by emotional exhaustion and a reduced capacity to sustain professional engagement (Awa et al., 2010; Sabagh et al., 2018). Within PETE, existing scholarship has documented emotional exhaustion and role-related strain among faculty members (Kinder et al., 2023; Richards et al., 2021). Emotional exhaustion is widely recognized as a core component of burnout and may precede broader patterns of disengagement and withdrawal (Maslach et al., 1996; Maslach & Leiter, 2008).

Faculty members' responsibilities require balancing teaching, research, and service expectations, often within institutional contexts that provide limited structural boundaries between professional and personal life (Smith-Suchon et al., 2025). Sustained exposure to these competing demands can contribute to chronic occupational stress and work-life imbalance, conditions that have been consistently associated with emotional exhaustion among PE faculty members (Kinder et al., 2023) and are conceptually linked to broader burnout syndrome (Maslach & Leiter, 2008). Burnout is commonly understood as a response to prolonged

workplace stressors and is characterized by diminished professional efficacy and reduced capacity to sustain engagement over time (Sabagh et al., 2018).

These patterns of emotional exhaustion and strain were evident prior to the COVID-19 pandemic; however, the pandemic altered the conditions of academic work in ways that coincided with increased stress, anxiety, and declines in faculty mental health (Byrom, 2020; Harkness et al., 2024). Rather than resolving as effects of the pandemic stabilized, emotional exhaustion and burnout-related strain remained salient for many faculty, reflecting the cumulative and ongoing nature of stress within academic work (Cotter et al., 2024). In this context, faculty members may develop or engage in strategies to manage or mitigate ongoing strain, some of which may be adaptive whereas others are maladaptive. More maladaptive strategies set the stage for withdrawal-based responses that emphasize sustainability over continued role expansion. One such withdrawal-based response that has gained increasing attention is *quiet quitting* (Harter, 2022). Conversely, adaptive strategies may assist faculty members in recalibrating and coping with their work. These concepts are explored further among US-based PETE faculty members in this study via occupational socialization theory (OST).

Occupational Socialization Theory

The OST was originally developed to examine the socialization of physical education teachers but has since been extended to better understand the socialization of doctoral students and faculty members (Brunsdon & Curtner-Smith, 2022; Kinder et al., 2023). Such offers a robust framework for examining how faculty members' expectations, professional identities, and responses to workplace culture are shaped and reshaped over time (Smith-Suchon et al., 2025). Although multiple conceptualizations of faculty socialization exist within the PETE literature (see Brunsdon & Curtner-Smith, 2022), this study draws on Richards and Kinder's (2024)

framework because it explicitly accounts for multiple entry points and pathways into faculty roles that are reflective of the non-linear and dynamic nature of academic careers.

Central to Richards and Kinder's (2024) framework is the teacher educator self, which captures the ongoing internal process through which faculty members make sense of institutional structures, role expectations, and their positioning within academic systems. This sensemaking process is inherently shaped by faculty members' sociocultural identities, which function as a lens through which academic norms, expectations, and power structures are interpreted (Smith-Suchon et al., 2025). Consistent with the dialectical nature of socialization, faculty members do not passively absorb these conditions but actively negotiate, enact, and revise their identities in response to institutional demands and sociopolitical contexts (Schempp & Graber, 1992). Linked to the teacher educator self are three interconnected components of faculty socialization: anticipatory socialization, academic career preparation, and faculty socialization, which capture how faculty development unfolds across academic careers (Richards & Kinder, 2024).

Anticipatory socialization occurs prior to entry into graduate education and reflects the ways individuals learn about physical education and teaching through some combination of their own K-12 experiences, formal professional preparation, and any time spent working in K-12 schools (Smith-Suchon et al., 2025). These experiences shape early beliefs about teaching, professional norms, and what quality practice looks like, forming an initial lens through which future faculty work is interpreted. *Academic career preparation* then refers to both the formal and informal experiences through which individuals learn about the academic profession (Richards & Kinder, 2024). While doctoral education often serves as a key site for academic career preparation, this process extends beyond coursework to include mentorship, research

collaborations, conferences, professional service, and other ancillary experiences that influence how individuals approach the norms and practices of academic work.

Faculty socialization occurs once individuals assume academic positions and begin navigating the cultural norms, evaluative structures, and sociopolitical dynamics of their departments and institutions. Importantly, these contexts may create tensions and micropolitical conflict when faculty members' values and expectations are misaligned with institutional norms (Richards, Kinder, et al., 2022). Academic cultures that emphasize conformity, productivity, or compliance can constrain faculty members' agency and limit opportunities to enact alternative approaches to teaching, scholarship, or service (Ortlieb et al., 2010). These tensions are central to how faculty members learn to manage role demands, negotiate boundaries, and make decisions about professional engagement over time, underscoring the importance of examining how responses to workplace stress emerge throughout individuals' academic careers.

Amid rising levels of stress and burnout across professional fields, scholars have sought to understand how employees respond to chronic workplace demands in adaptive and maladaptive ways (Galanis et al., 2023). Adaptive responses are those that prioritize the health and wellbeing of faculty members, promote boundary setting, and seek to promote successful management of work and non-work-related roles. Adaptive coping strategies in the workplace relate to an employee's cognitive and behavioural approaches that support their adaptation to workplace demands, supporting their psychological wellbeing, general health and professional functioning (Holton et al., 2016; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Examples include proactive approaches, such as planning, time management and seeking social support, reframing challenges in a positive manner, anticipating and responding to future potential stressors, accepting what cannot be changed and finding humour in work life (Salimzadeh et al., 2021).

One such example of adaptive coping involves the *recalibration of work engagement*, wherein individuals prioritize work-life harmony by decelerating career ambitions while continuing to fulfill primary responsibilities (Klotz & Bolino, 2022). Importantly, these behaviors may also be understood as efforts to establish healthier boundaries and navigate or respond to unsustainable work expectations, rather than as indicators of disengagement from the role (Ball, 2003; Maslach & Leiter, 2008). Such reflects a recalibration of engagement in which individuals continue to meet core job responsibilities but withdraw from the persistent “above and beyond” labor expectations that contribute to ongoing exhaustion (Pearce, 2022). Within the context of neoliberal higher education, however, such boundary setting may be framed negatively as it believed to reduce productivity, despite its potential to support staff well-being (Lawless, 2023). Heightened attention to mental health and the broader disruptions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath appear to have accelerated the visibility of these responses (Christian, 2022).

Maladaptive responses to stress, by contrast, are those that can lead to harmful psychological and physiological consequences for the faculty member and are associated, in the long run, with reduced quality of life. Maladaptive coping strategies can hinder employees’ adaptation, diminish their well-being and negatively impact upon their work performance over time (Holton et al., 2016; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Such strategies tend to include avoidance, withdrawal or strategic evasion stress as opposed to addressing it at the source (Salimzadeh et al., 2021). In the workplace, this can present as social withdrawal, denial, wishful thinking, self-criticism, distraction and even substance use, all of which may offer temporary relief from stress but are generally correlated with decreased wellbeing, more psychological distress and reduced professional functioning (Salimzadeh et al., 2021). (CITE). ADD A FEW MORE SENTENCES

AND A TRANSITION HERE. Among these behaviors is the notion of quiet quitting, which includes behaviors related to workplace disengagement. The gradual withdrawal from work beyond formal requirements has been documented for decades under labels such as *withdrawal* or *disengagement* (Christian, 2022). Within education settings, experiences of marginalization, burnout, and demoralization have been identified as conditions that may precipitate maladaptive responses to stress (Ibrahim & Alhabbash, 2022; Lindborg, 2022). In this context, quiet quitting has been understood as remaining in one's workplace while refraining from investing energy beyond what is minimally required to fulfill formal role requirements (Galanis et al., 2023). Such is closely related to *coasting*, through which employees seek to maintain the illusion of meeting job responsibilities without engaging in additional discretionary effort (Christian, 2022; Dawson, 2022)

Recent insight suggests that maladaptive responses to the workplace, such as quiet quitting, reflect a broader pattern of recalibrated work engagement across the workforce, drawing attention to how individuals respond to sustained occupational strain (Harter, 2022). Within education, this phenomenon warrants closer examination, particularly given longstanding concerns related to faculty burnout and well-being (Cotter et al., 2024; Lufler & McNulty, 2022). Within PETE, faculty members have reported persistent role stress and symptoms of burnout associated with managing competing expectations related to teaching, research, and service roles (Richards et al., 2022). Given documented patterns of emotional exhaustion and role-related stress among PETE faculty (Kinder et al., 2023; Richards et al., 2021), and the central role these faculty play in preparing future physical educators and advancing the field through scholarship, understanding how they experience and respond to cumulative strain has important implications for the long-term viability of the field. Guided by OST, the purpose of this study was to examine

how US PETE faculty members engage in adaptive and maladaptive responses to stress in the workplace. Research questions included: (a) How do PETE faculty members describe the sources of emotional exhaustion and strain associated with their academic roles?, (b) How do faculty members experience and enact responses to sustained emotional exhaustion within PETE?, and (c) how does organizational context shape faculty members' approaches to managing strain and recalibrating work engagement?

Methods

This study employed qualitative interview methods to examine how PETE faculty members make sense of and navigate perceived workplace stress (Patton, 2015). A phenomenological approach was used to capture participants' understanding and interpretations of their own lived experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study was guided by a relativist ontological stance, recognizing that reality is socially constructed and experienced differently by individuals (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), alongside a social constructivist epistemology that emphasizes how meaning is co-constructed through participants' interpretations of their experiences (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005). In-depth qualitative interviews were selected as the primary method of data collection to allow for rich, detailed exploration of faculty members' perspectives on, and to understand their experiences of, quiet quitting (Patton, 2015).

To enhance rigor and trustworthiness, a series of methodological decisions were made that acknowledge the iterative and interpretive nature of qualitative inquiry (Patton, 2015). First, the research team maintained a shared researcher journal during data collection and analysis, which served as a space to document analytic decisions and emerging questions, thereby promoting transparency and reflexivity across the research process (Richards & Hemphill, 2018). The inclusion of multiple researchers in the data analysis facilitated researcher triangulation,

with team members engaging in regular analytic discussion and serving as peer debriefers to challenge assumptions and refine developing themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, and while our primary analytical goal was to develop major themes to represent participants' experiences, attention was given to identifying and highlighting negative cases throughout analysis. These disconfirming cases are discussed in the results section.

Participants and Setting

Prior to recruitment, the university ethics committee at the lead author's institution approved all research protocols. Participants were recruited from PETE programs across the US. This qualitative study is part of a large-scale research project about U.S. PETE faculty members' workplace experiences which include both quantitative and qualitative investigations as a part of a convergent parallel mixed methods design (Patton, 2015). Using the Fall 2022 version of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign PETE Faculty Database, which stores the updated contact information of PETE faculty working in U.S higher education (Graber et al., 2011, 2020; Richards et al., 2022), the online survey was first distributed for the broader research project. Next, participants from the initial pool were asked to participate in a voluntary follow-up interview. In total, 26 PETE faculty members were recruited, and one semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant. This sample size was deemed appropriate based on the guidelines of phenomenological research studies (Patton, 2015).

The final sample consisted of 26 PETE faculty members, with 16 females and 10 males, who had an average of 13.04 years ($SD = 8.14$) of work experience in higher education, ranging from 2 years to 37 years. The participants' ages ranged from 34 to 65 years, with a mean of 45.81 years ($SD = 8.88$). The racial distribution of the participants was predominantly White ($n = 23$; 88.46%), followed by Asian ($n = 2$), and Multiracial ($n = 1$). Most participants held doctoral

degrees ($n = 22$), while others held master's degrees ($n = 4$). Tenured faculty members comprised 50% ($n = 13$), while 7 were not tenured but on a tenure-track, and 6 were not in tenure-track positions. A total of 19 participants had prior teaching experience in K-12 settings, while 7 had no experience. Regarding geographical information, 12 participants (46.15%) were from the South region, followed by the West ($n = 7$), Midwest ($n = 6$), and Northeast ($n = 1$) in the US.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews (Patton, 2015) conducted by members of the research team. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed the interviewer to utilize the guide for every interview while allowing flexibility to ask follow-up questions based on participants' responses (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Questions were developed based on current literature surrounding OST and faculty socialization (e.g., Graber et al., 2020; Richards et al., 2022). Examples of questions include: (a) how would you explain your current stressor across your work and personal life?, (b) how do you find that you tend to respond in stressful situations?, and (c) have you ever decided to let something go or disconnect from a work task in order to manage stress? Each interview took place over the phone or through video conferencing software and lasted approximately 50 to 65 minutes. All interviews were scheduled at a time selected by each participant to ensure convenience. Participants were informed that interviews would be audio recorded and subsequently transcribed for data analysis.

Data Analysis

Once transcribed, the data were analyzed through the multistage approach of collaborative qualitative analysis that spanned approximately six months (Richards & Hemphill, 2018). This process took an inductive approach to planning and organizing the steps in the

process and was deductive in that data were analyzed through a socialization lens. Open and axial coding processes were conducted by three researchers, with an additional member providing theoretical support on a weekly basis through research team meetings and notes in the research journal (Richards & Hemphill, 2018). After open and axial coding, a pilot codebook was created using the codes identified and broader categories developed connecting codes. This preliminary codebook was tested over the course of four weeks, using previously uncoded transcripts, where revisions were made as needed. Once finalized, the codebook was applied across the full dataset, including transcripts coded in earlier stages of analysis. The research team continued to meet weekly to engage in ongoing discussion and triangulation, making analytic decisions and revisiting the codebook as warranted by the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The final stage of analysis involved constructing a thematic structure by synthesizing codes and categories into themes and subthemes that best represented participants' experiences (Richards & Hemphill, 2018). These are presented in the results section that follows.

Results

This study sought to explore PETE faculty members' experience of culminative workplace strain and how they navigate, manage, and recalibrate their engagement with academic work in adaptive and maladaptive ways. Through data analysis, three interrelated themes were constructed that capture these experiences across career stages and institutional contexts. The three themes were: (a) Faculty role expectations and the intensification of academic work, (b) Protective factors buffered PETE faculty against a stressful work environment, and (c) PETE faculty mitigated stress through adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies. Pseudonyms are used when discussing participant experiences.

Faculty Role Expectations and the Intensification of Academic Work

269 Within the role expectations of teaching, research, and service, the participants expressed
270 a sense of being inundated with excessive workloads and role management. Kyle noted, “you’re
271 always going to be challenged to balance those, sometimes, competing priorities of teaching,
272 research, and service”. Russell added, “I gotta prep for a meeting this afternoon ... have a whole
273 report due as well. So, that balance between admin gets even harder with, you know, teaching
274 loads”. For some participants, these multiple responsibilities sometimes led to prioritizing some
275 obligations while withdrawing from others, giving rise to feelings of stress. Olivia voiced, “I
276 prioritized my teaching workload over my research, [so] I’m constantly stressed about research”.
277 Janet serves “as chair of our department, so that takes up an enormous amount of my time”.

278 The considerable workload imposed on the participants was accompanied by insufficient
279 time-allocation to complete the tasks at hand due to the nature and pressure of academia, leading
280 them to feel as if “the work is never done” (Diane). Bradley explained, “working in this field, the
281 work can expand as much as you let it, so there is not a moment of the day that I couldn’t fill up
282 with something.” Kyle also pointed out, “you’ll probably hear faculty [members] say that they
283 could be working 24/7 and still not have everything done.” In addition, participants described
284 how work routinely extended into non-work time, further exacerbating the tendency towards
285 overworking such as “grading at home” (Bradley), “work[ing] in the evenings”, and “checking
286 emails” (Janet) from administrators and students.

287 While the stressors associated with managing their work and personal lives was
288 challenging, participants had been enculturated to view such an investment as ‘common-sense’,
289 at least up until tenure and promotion. One participant, Ronald, drew an analogy between his
290 socialization into faculty and climbing up mountains: “the first mountain is getting over your
291 dissertation and getting past that. Then you move into faculty and then you’re climbing that

mountain on the assistant professor track towards tenure”. From this perspective, being assistant professors meant being avid climbers who must showcase academic agility across a variety of roles and responsibilities. During this pre-tenure stage, overworking and sacrificing a work-life balance were viewed as a necessary sacrifice to reach the pinnacle of tenure and promotion. This predicament of being an assistant professor was eloquently articulated by Olivia:

I do feel a little bit of imposter syndrome as a new faculty member, and then the pressure to perform to be able to reach tenure and promotion is always at the back of my mind. So, it’s a weird mixture of wanting to find balance between work and personal life but also making sure that I perform in a way that I would be proud of myself when the time comes to show my work to others.

Interestingly, the attainment of tenure caused significant alterations in both mindset and working styles. Job security as a compensation for tenure allowed participants to strategically lighten their workload and pursue a work-life balance, thereby alleviating stress. Many tenured professors in this study noted the positive changes after tenure. Examples include, “I’ve definitely changed my work style over the years. I was tenured in year six and so that definitely relieved some stress” (Hannah), “once I got tenure and got promoted, ... the pressure was relieved” (Shirley), and “I take big blocks of time off, I’m comfortable traveling and doing different things with family, and it’s changed post-tenure” (Ralph).

One of the participants, however, offered an alternative explanation of the qualitative difference in characteristics of faculty roles before and after tenure: “once you get tenure, you’re asked to do a lot more things and you have different responsibilities at the university that you didn’t before, so I think it’s natural for people’s workload to shift and change post tenure” (Ronald). Indeed, the participants who had achieved tenure described taking on more service and

administrative roles than teaching and research. While serving as administrators, participants also felt challenged and stressed not because of excessive workload but because of “having to make decisions that affect my colleagues” (Hannah) and “everybody else” (Dawn).

Protective Factors Buffered PETE Faculty Against a Stressful Work Environment

The participants recognized the stress stemming from the multifaceted nature of their roles associated with the added pressure of pursuing tenure and promotion. However, they also discussed the protective factors that aided in adaptive stress management to navigate a stressful work environment. One such factor being a strong support system, which helped participants manage their stress. Internal support from colleagues along with external support from family and friends helped offset the feelings of stress. Many participants sensed a feeling of camaraderie and support within their department when they have supportive colleagues with whom they can “talk it out” (Russell), “share daily life” (Maria), and “chat all the time about the program and our students and our classes and different things” (Diane). Linda found support in colleagues navigating similar career timelines, “I have another faculty member who started at the same year, so like starting the position together, going through all the stages together. That has been really helpful”. This sense of support was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition back to in-person instruction. Vincent described this period as a “culture shift” noting, “nobody knew how to do it, and I think everybody was trying to support each other as best they could”. Hannah, who was navigating significant health challenges during the pandemic, echoed this experience, stating, “my colleague helped pick up some of the classes. My department was very supportive and understanding of what I was going through”.

The participants also valued the roles of external support outside from their workplace on their stress management. Angela noted, “I try to set aside time to be just sort of by myself or with

my family, whether it's playing board games with them or watching a movie with them or doing something enjoyable". Other ways of internal support were reported by participants, including "traveling in summer ... to see them [my kids] them periodically" (Sandra), "spiritual wellness ... that's what helps me balance" (Martha), and "a group of girlfriends who we meet once a week on zoom to kind of decompress" (Christine). For some participants, job satisfaction worked to create buy-in and positively affected their appraisals of stress at work. These participants were satisfied with working as PETE faculty members and collectively expressed, "I am happy with my job most of the time" (Vincent), "I enjoy coming here and I love being in my office, work on the stuff" (Linda), and "I love coming to work. That feels comfortable to me." (Lori).

In addition to interpersonal and personal sources of support, participants identified institutional and structural factors that shaped how supported they felt in their work. Many participants identified that the collegiate/departmental affiliation of their PETE programs had an impact on their professional lives. Most participants reported that their PETE programs were housed in either College or Department of Education or Colleges or Departments of Kinesiology and Health Sciences within their respective institutions. Each positionality has its own benefits and challenges for the participants' workplace experiences in different ways. More specifically, the participants whose PETE programs were situated in Education had a profound sense of being valued and a strong communal atmosphere. As one participant said, "positionality matters, and physical education might be better understood when positioned in education" (Ronald).

Additionally, Roger shared,

Three years ago...physical education moved over to the College of Education.

Culture is all about teaching. The current department is a very positive

atmosphere where physical education is considered just as important as early childhood, elementary, middle, anything else.

However, some participants acknowledged that being situated within education did not necessarily guarantee them adequate and immediate support as there was often physical separation between the physical education building and spaces where other education majors were located. Theresa noted, “I kind of felt like we’re forgotten ... we’re just not in the in the hub of things in the main education building on campus”. Bradley elaborated,

We’re in a school of Ed, but we’re not actually in the school of Ed, right. We’re kind of always a little satellite. We’re usually located where athletics are. So, that’s, you know, different than we’re not like elementary yet or special education or that are inside the actual [education] building.

For the participants whose PETE departments were housed in the Department of Kinesiology/Health Sciences, there was often greater support for the pursuit of internal and extramural funding, which seemed to reduce programmatic stressors regarding faculty reductions. Russell articulated the benefits of being housed within the umbrella of kinesiology: “most departments are now led by exercise scientists ... Our department has never been denied the ability to do anything ... we’ve been supported and pushed through”. The participants said that securing funding for their department does matter in academia because it was connected to program shutdowns and their job security. Kelly stated, “being in Health Sciences ... we have good money coming in, and we haven’t lost anybody. We have great labs and faculty”. Nevertheless, some participants noted feeling marginalized within the larger exercise science discipline. Ronald voiced, “I feel disconnected from people who I might otherwise want to collaborate with because we’re the only teacher licensure program I think in the whole unit here

or the whole college”. Roger described positioning PETE programs within the kinesiology as “stepsisters” due to the subtle separation that existed. He continued, explaining that he felt as if his colleagues viewed physical education as being a less pure form of science: “[They look at us like,] ‘well, they’re *just* PE teachers, we’re exercise *science* people” (emphasis added).

PETE Faculty Mitigated Stress Through Adaptive and Maladaptive Coping Strategies

Most participants reported facing some levels of stress while working as PETE faculty members. However, the participants’ responses to stress varied depending on the coping mechanisms they utilized. Two distinct approaches to stress management among the participants were identified: adaptive and maladaptive strategies. First, the participants utilized adaptive strategies that allowed them to progress through the stressful time and ultimately reach their professional goals. Physical activity served as a prominent adaptive strategy for alleviating stress. Multiple forms of being active, ranging from walks to sport participation, helped, as evidenced by comments such as: “I also destress by being outside ... [to] play with my kids in the backyard and take the dog for walks” (Hannah), “yoga has changed my life” (Shirley), and “I play an old guy soccer league and I play lots of pickleball” (Bradley).

Furthermore, being able to disconnect from work and spend time out of the office helped them come through stressful times. Given the significant amount of role expectations imposed on PETE faculty members, most participants noted that they had not only struggled with but also intentionally sought to manage their work and home lives. Some participants voiced the importance of seeking work-life balance, evidenced by such statements, “we all are seeking balance. That is the key to life”, (Bruce) “my work-life balance, I am more intentional of that” (Diane), while others acknowledged the difficulty of achieving a place of balance:

405 I struggle with work life balance, and I think part of that's because I get so much
406 significance from my job. I wish it wasn't as much that way but [the] letting go
407 part is hard. It's just a control thing, I'm sure (Martha).

408 To achieve a sense of work-life harmony, many participants set and self-regulated their
409 boundaries to "turn off" the work mode "to be a good mom/wife" at home (Martha), and vice
410 versa. While participants identified several strategies for managing work and personal lives, the
411 most frequently appearing strategy was refraining from responding to professional
412 correspondence outside of work hours. Hannah noted, "I am big on turning off my phone and
413 computer when I pick up my kids and so then I'm just mom in the evening and hanging out with
414 them and enjoying my time with them and stuff". Vincent added, "you can see the emails roll in,
415 but unless it's an emergency, I don't touch work stuff on the weekends". These were often
416 explicitly communicated with students, as explained by Bradley: "I'm very clear with students
417 that ... I'm not gonna respond at 6:30 or 8:30 or 10:30 at night." This "shutting off" strategy,
418 however, did not explicitly apply when communicating with colleagues and administrators.
419 Alternatively, some participants intentionally gave their co-workers an implicit message that they
420 prefer not to work outside of regular working times. Vincent shared from his experience:

421 I didn't want [deans or department chairs] thinking that I was working at eight
422 o'clock at night. So, I'd set it to send at 7:30 the next morning. So, they would
423 think, "all right, she's not going to respond at night." Because I thought if they
424 know I'm working, they'll just keep sending more. I didn't want that to happen.

425 Another adaptive strategy that the participants employed was reassessment of the tasks on
426 their plate by "prioritiz[ing]... and identify[ing] what's really important" (Linda) and "knowing
427 when to say yes and when to say no" (Bradley). Although the utilization of boundaries was

effective, many noted that this skill was learned after feeling out of balance in previous career stages in tandem with their increased work efficiency over the span of their career. As Linda explained, “since this is my sixth year being here, I’ve been teaching the same class ... teaching the same class multiple times significantly reduces the time I need for the preparation.” Christine also shared a similar experience of becoming more efficient in teaching preparation: “I have found more harmony with me prepping for classes less because I’m comfortable teaching them. ... I have better grasp of what I want to get out of the classroom and don’t need to over prepare for it.” Janet explained her development of work efficiency: “I’ve learned an efficient way to handle all my emails...and...deal with emails that people don’t respond to, and all of that stuff”.

On the contrary, the second way to cope with the stress among the PETE faculty members in this study was a maladaptive coping mechanism. The participants (referring to themselves or other colleagues) discussed withdrawing from certain tasks, especially those not directly impacting tenure and promotion. Although these participants continued to fulfill formal job responsibilities, they did not describe engaging in work beyond what was required. Bruce pointed out, “a lot of times where I see the faculty skip out on is that service aspect, and I think that’s obviously because it’s nothing that really gets evaluated”. Particularly, post-tenure was viewed as a tipping point at which PETE faculty members began to disengage from certain tasks, triggered by a combination of increased job security and diminishing work motivation. Hannah shared, “I have a colleague who recently was tenured and so she says no to a lot more things ... I still need you to be a team player.” Martha added, “I do have some colleagues who do the bare minimum ... I think it’s the nature of where they are in their career cycle where they’re deenergized like I’ve been doing this too long ... and don’t have passion”.

One participant, Ronald, explained how he was selective about what he took on, not wanting to be viewed as overly reliable: “if you develop this reputation as somebody who does everything and does it well, does it on time, then people are going to see that and come to you for everything because they know that you’ll get it done.” Some participants pointed out the excessive amount of workload and feeling of emotional exhaustion inevitably led them to not invest fully in certain tasks:

I’m going to go teach a lesson that I have half prepped because you don’t feel like there’s enough time to do it all, and I’m already behind on the next thing. We’re just kind of like going through the motions to get to it (Christine).

Beyond withdrawing from discretionary responsibilities, participants also described colleagues whose disengagement extended to core aspects of the academic role. Ronald reflected that some PETE faculty had “got to a certain point and they just became dirtbags,” explaining that they “stopped doing everything. They stopped doing their research. They stopped being present. They stopped supporting their students.” Ronald further characterized these colleagues as faculty who “barely publish or do any scholarship, are never visible ... barely come to department meetings, [and] have a reputation for not supporting their students well.” While most participants did not express that they would walk away from the profession to eliminate stress, some did dream about leaving the professoriate and switching careers. Christine provided an example by noting, “I’ve looked and considered more like [research] position so moving away from the academic teaching side and more into their research component where it would be more team-oriented, more practice-based larger projects.”

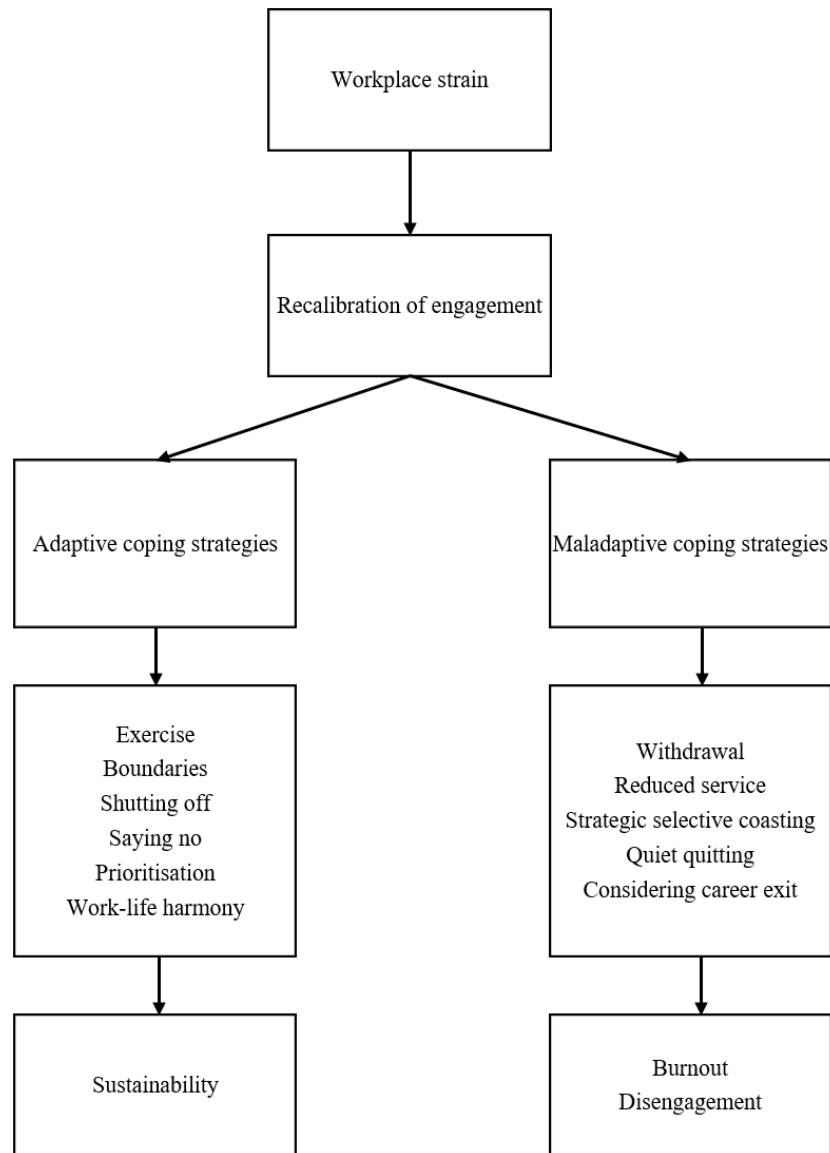
Discussion

Guided by OST, the purpose of this study was to examine how US PETE faculty members engage in adaptive and maladaptive responses to stress in the workplace. The findings provide valuable insights into PETE faculty members' managing workplace stress in the US, which are of international significance. The expectation of PETE faculty to oscillate between teaching, research, and service roles (Graber et al., 2020) was a source of tension for the participants in this study. The perceived pressure of their excessive workloads is further compounded by insufficient time to complete work-related duties. Aligned with previous research (Richards et al., 2022), some of the sociopolitical stressors of the PETE faculty role appear to be particularly pertinent at the pre-tenure stage, during which time participants expressed stress-related concerns about the perceived need to overwork and sacrifice a work-life harmony. The metaphor of 'climbing the mountain' toward tenured professorship, combined with the sense that the work is 'never done', reflects the aggressive accountability measures (Bullough, 2016) within the neoliberal order of higher education (Barker, 2017). However, in the context of the current political climate, it is worth noting that the US academic workforce is becoming increasingly reliant upon contingent employment, whereby the system once dominated by full-time and tenure-track faculty is being replaced by increasing numbers of non-tenure-track and part-time staff (Colby, 2023; Murai & Foote, 2026). This is due, at least in part, to the increasing grip of neoliberalism and academic capitalism in higher education (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), in which there appears to be concerted efforts to facilitate the erosion of tenure-track positions. This will inevitably create a form of downstream precarity for faculty staff, the implications of which will be disastrous for faculty wellbeing.

Our findings also indicate that PETE faculty members employ a range of proactive strategies to mitigate the stressors associated with their workplace pressures and protect against feelings of burnout. Collegiate affiliations with, and camaraderie among, PETE faculty members was identified as a bulwark against programmatic stress (Richards et al., 2022), and support from family and friends was cited as a counterbalance to work-related stress. Notably, some participants expressed a strong sense of belonging and feeling valued, whereas others expressed marginality, based on the organizational culture and physical location of the faculty (Richards & Kinder 2024). Regarding faculty reductions, those housed within a Department of Kinesiology or Health Sciences expressed fewer programmatic stressors than those within colleges and department for education. Health and exercise science units were perceived as stable, in part due to the influx of extramural funding brought in across the department at large. Unless specifically involved in such funded research endeavors, however, PETE faculty members may be hidden amidst the productivity of their exercise science peers. Such has previously been linked to PETE program closures, particularly when exercise science enrollments are large and PETE program enrollments shrink (Ward, 2019).

When workplace stress was experienced, participants sought to mitigate the effects through both adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies (Figure 1). Adaptive strategies included engaging in physical activity, deliberate attempts to disconnect from work and by setting self-regulated boundaries to achieve a healthy work-life balance. Such aligns with prior research related to PETE faculty members in higher education (Smith-Suchon et al., 2025). Finding this harmonious balance appeared to be a challenge for all participants; however, some appeared to want to regain a sense of agency in the pursuit of sustainable working conditions. Other adaptive strategies included ‘shutting off,’ by refraining from responding to emails and text messages in

517 non-work hours. Incidentally, this self-restraint did not always apply to liaising with academic
518 colleagues which may, ironically, defeat the point. Finally, some participants sought to reassess
519 their work-related priorities and learn when to ‘say no.’



520

521 *Figure 1: Adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies in response to workplace strain*

522 Setting these healthy boundaries, however, appears to follow participants' previous
523 experience of being out of balance and realizing the imperative to better manage work and

personal lives in intentional ways. Such aligns with participants wanting to avoid developing a reputation as someone who ‘says yes’ to everything. This highlights a deliberate recalibration of engagement, whereby faculty strategically manage expectations to protect their time, energy, and sustainability within the role.

To avoid burnout and stress, participants also engaged in – and regularly witnessed – maladaptive strategies. Participants' accounts suggested that service responsibilities were often deprioritized, as these activities were perceived to carry fewer evaluative consequences than research and teaching. Therefore, some participants drew upon their micropolitical literacy to strategically neglect these ‘wider’ duties as they are not viewed as directly related to tenure or promotion. It could be argued, therefore, that the increasingly neoliberal architecture of PETE, and of education more broadly, is leading to a culture of *performativity*. In this opaque performative culture, practitioners are incentivized to respond to targets, key indicators and evaluations, in which their personal beliefs are often superseded by strategic calculation (Ball, 2003). This performativity is potentially a subtler branch of quiet quitting because these participants were not only avoiding going above and beyond (Pearce, 2022; Klotz & Bolino, 2022) but were actively prioritizing aspects of their work which served the expectations of others and aligned with career advancement.

This adherence to expectations may be described as *strategic selective coasting*, whereby PETE faculty sustain their employment by not going the extra mile (Christian, 2022; Dawson, 2022) and strategically prioritize forms of labor which serve their self-interests as a means of mitigating stress. Interestingly, however, stress does not seem to be entirely alleviated with promotion and tenure; rather, it merely shifts in form. While tenure reduced pressure related to

546 job security and performance evaluation, participants described increased emotional and
547 relational strain associated with expanded service and administrative responsibilities.

548 Of further interest, some participants within colleges and departments of education
549 expressed marginality and feeling ‘forgotten’, in part because of physical separation from their
550 colleagues. Such has previously been identified as a trigger for maladaptive responses, including
551 quiet quitting (Ibrahim & Alhabbash, 2022; Lindborg, 2022). Incidentally, Hendry’s (1975)
552 classic assertion that PE teachers experience ‘survival in a marginal role’ appears to have
553 application to PETE faculty members’ experiences, advancing research in this vein (see Smith-
554 Suchon et al., 2025). Participants’ accounts suggest that funding was viewed as central to
555 program stability and faculty retention, with important implications for the career security of pre-
556 tenure faculty in increasingly precarious academic environments. Consequently, navigating the
557 complex sociopolitical landscape of a career in PETE – within neoliberal university
558 environments that propagate the imperative of academic publishing and the ‘publish or perish’
559 mantra (Madikizela-Madiya, 2022) – is emotionally challenging. Of further note, while this
560 study included six non-tenure track faculty members, their specific experiences, aside from those
561 that align with those of their tenure-track colleagues. Under-representation of non-tenure track
562 faculty voices represents a continued issue in the landscape of PETE faculty socialization
563 research and is an important direction for future research. This is particularly important given the
564 increasing reliance on contingent and non-tenure-track faculty appointments, alongside growing
565 legislative efforts to weaken tenure protections in the United States (AAUP, 2024).

566 Although these participants stopped short of quitting their role, they nevertheless engaged
567 in and witnessed quiet quitting strategies. Quiet quitting may well be a hidden epidemic, both
568 within PETE and education more broadly. While it may have negative connotations, quiet

quitting could also be understood as a form of silent social resistance, or a soft rejection of unsustainable work-related pressures associated with neoliberal encroachment (Barker, 2017). Our findings suggest that PETE faculty members experience a tension between setting healthy boundaries to protect their work-life balance on the one hand, while being complicit in the very culture of performativity on the other. Navigating a career within PETE requires micropolitical literacies. On the one hand, faculty members must proactively seek to mitigate detrimental stressors associated with neoliberalism to safeguard their wellbeing and avoid burnout. On the other hand, they must maintain the ethical integrity required to fulfill the role.

Conclusion

These findings suggest that emotional exhaustion, rather than isolated short-term stressors, underpins many PETE faculty members' experiences of work-related strain and subsequent coping strategies. While the COVID-19 pandemic did not create these conditions, it served as a contextual inflection point that coincided with and intensified existing patterns of boundary erosion and exhaustion, rendering withdrawal-based responses such as quiet quitting more plausible in academic life. As illustrated in this study, faculty members engage in a variety of coping strategies, some of which are adaptive, when faced with stress. It is nevertheless important to recognize that not all strategies were adaptive and some participants exhibited signs of burnout that led them to engage in, or notice others who engaged in, quiet quitting.

Despite growing attention to PETE faculty stress, much of the existing literature has examined discrete outcomes such as emotional exhaustion, marginalization, and job satisfaction, rather than burnout as a multidimensional and cumulative process. The findings of this study suggest that withdrawal-based responses such as quiet quitting may represent an important manifestation of burnout among PETE faculty members. More targeted research is needed to

592 examine how burnout develops across career stages, how it is shaped by institutional and
593 sociopolitical contexts, and how faculty members navigate sustainability in roles characterized
594 by expanding expectations. Examining the ways that different classifications of faculty members,
595 including administrator and non-tenure track faculty member experience and cope with stress is
596 also warranted. Attending to burnout in this way is critical not only for faculty well-being but
597 also for the future of PETE and physical education more generally.

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