"But in your case…?" The normative trajectory of academic, class-based disablism in Higher Education

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Abstract

Despite growing bodies of work on both disabled academics and working-class academics in Higher Education (HE), there is little research on precarious disabled academics, or their trajectories through academia, a place where they are likely to be found by dint of circumstances which tend to render them as 'other' to organisational norms. Drawing primarily on a ten-year autoethnography, which was supplemented by informal conversations with disabled academics, and more recent formal interviews with disabled academics and recruiters, this chapter begins to unpick some of the ways in which expectations of disabled academics, and the non-disabled 'unencumbered' worker ideal, blend with the class-based assumptions of academia, to perpetuate the ethnocentric ideals which continue to render working-class disabled people as an ill-fit for academic roles and careers.

Keywords: Precarity; Disability; Working-class; Trajectories; Ideal academic

Introduction and context

'The ideal candidate should have a proven upwards trajectory' (jobs.ac.uk, 2024a, para 2). Such are the guidelines facing aspiring academics, searching job advertisements on conventional sites academic recruitment sites. Invariably framed in affirmative language which speak of strength and quality, they are ostensibly neutral and objective in their appeal to us all, especially those with an academic striving for 'excellence' - whatever that is deemed to be. As an Assistant Professor role this criterion was positioned to attract someone who has already had some success in gaining academic employment, but similar statements are made on short-terms entry level positions, even where this are teaching only, e.g., 'to exhibit the capacity for major contributions to scholarship' (jobs.ac.uk, 2024b, para 3)

My recent research with disabled academics – undertaken with Rebecca Fish - suggests that these are typical criteria in job descriptions at all levels, and that potential candidates tend to consider themselves ready to join or ascend the academic ladder if they possess teaching, research, or other experiences relevant to the specific academic field advertised (Wilde and Fish, forthcoming). In judging whether to make the considerable investment of time and energy[1] required for most applications (found to be a common dilemma) any doubts raised about their suitability might be quelled by the promises of equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) which invariably follow. Found almost at the end of the two job

[1] Our recent research with disabled academics estimated that an average of a full week's working hours is spent on initial applications, and a further three to seven days on interview preparation (Wilde and Fish, forthcoming).

advertisements above, both universities used exactly the same phrase to assure candidates that the institution 'actively supports equality, diversity and inclusion and encourages applications from all sections of society' (jobs.ac.uk, 2024a and b).

Whilst these are just two advertisements, the juxtaposition of high, multiple measures of success are embedded in a matrix of normative assumptions which are tied firmly to an ascending trajectory of achievement and status. Further examination of advertisements and job descriptions reveals that even scant discourse analysis of the language of EDI clashes wildly with the conditions of employment, and exclusionary experiences of many marginalised or aspiring academics (Wilde and Fish, forthcoming). Similarly, emerging work on EDI within academic workforces suggests that the inbuilt and meritocratic notion of the 'upward curve' (e.g., Peterson et al., 2012; Waterfield et al., 2019; Reay, 2021; Brown and Leigh, 2020) is used deployed uncritically in assessments made of 'high calibre' and predictions of promising careers, shaping institutional practices, processes, and assumptions of academic competency and status far beyond recruitment. As Wilson (2023) has argued, meritocracy in the academic workforce is a myth, rationalising employment for 'superhuman' roles with ill-defined forms of objectivity and the continuing existence of nepotism and patronage. These studies also show that the biosocial[2] (Meloni et al., 2016) characteristics of those who are perceived as an ill-fit for the mould of this exemplary figure, usually corresponds to membership of social groups who already bear the burden of social inequalities, economic, ethnic, gender, impairment, and sexual (Peterson et al., 2012; Waterfield et al., 2019; Reay, 2021; Brown and Leigh, 2020). Campbell (2020, p.212) aptly characterised the anticipated ideal academic as an 'unencumbered worker'. In several differing respects, the multiple and intersectional barriers facing those who lack privilege by dint of their economic, biosocial grouping, or marginalised identities, are more likely to be seen as 'encumbered' workers.

Universities are founded on 'technicism,' or instrumentalist views of people as resources, where assumptions and rationales for action are 'based on assumptions of the archetypal academic and bodyscapes' (Brown and Leigh, 2020, p.210), rendering workers as objects. Deliberately or unconsciously, the shaping of this curve is inextricable from the expectations, infrastructures, conditions, barriers, and lives of academic workforces, and can even be seen as the driving force of the academic sector. Thus, intended or not, the expected trajectory and technicism blends with other deeply embedded cultural norms – such as perceptions of ideal or good 'fit' to existing teams and unquestioned, if not valorised, reliance on networking and patronage (Friedman & Laurison, p.2-3). Disavowing the multitude of experiences and 'adventitious happenings' which disrupt the 'coherence of everyday life' and projects of self-identity (Giddens, 1991, p.128) the homogeneity of the workforce is perpetuated, a

[2] Constituted by those the synthesis of constructed categories with personal body characteristics, e.g., race, gender, class, impairment, sexual).

population who have gained the resources[3] to survive the ‘squid game’ (Dong-hyuk & Ji-yeon, 2021) of academia[4].

Simultaneously, these dynamics promote a wide range of damaging attitudes, practices, and processes, as the ethnocentrism of a limited group within the workforce (e.g., class, skin colour, non-disabled) and the hierarchies therein continues as the norm. Even EDI initiatives tend to revolve around the sameness of institutional cultures; the common use of the ‘Wall of BAME’ (WOB) – deemed ‘outdated and offensive’ by some minoritised ethnic communities (Bradley, 2021, para 5) ‘others’ minoritised ethnic communities and individuals on several levels. Such ideas, replicated across marginalised groups, are deeply meritocratic. WOB echoes a ‘wall of fame,’ portraying aspirational/inspirational images of individuals who can be seen to have succeeded and/or who are deemed to have notable or extraordinary virtues or skills. Not only does this serve to highlight the ethnocentric core and those who are exhibited as ethnically different to the usual ‘stars,’ it can be seen as a form of ‘inspiration porn’ (Young, 2014) with adverse effects include the objectification and re-stereotyping of groups and the dismissal, disavowal, or even demonisation of those who not gain these achievements (Burt and McCarty, 2024).

These are merely glimpses of the ways in which a wide range of life experiences and forms of cultural capital are excluded from academia. While some of these exclusionary forces might be discerned in policies and institutional frameworks, and the practices of allied institutions such as research and enterprise funding bodies, it seems that that the hidden ‘mobilisation of bias’ Bachrach and Baratz (1962; 1963) is the most influential factor in the perpetuation of marginalisation across under-represented groups (see Reay, 2002, and Gill, 2009 on women; Savage, 2003, and Reay 2021 on class; Thomas, 2020, and Hartlep and Ball (2020) on race and ethnicity; Brown and Leigh, 2020, Inckle, 2019, Olsen et al.2020, on disability; Hattery et al., 2022, Reay, 2021, and Wilde, 2022 on the need for intersectional approaches).

Bachrach and Baratz (1963) demonstrated how the mobilisation of bias often reinforces the power of those who wield most power, through ‘non-decision making’ reinforcing whilst concealing the reproduction of ethnocentric norms. In so doing they are argued to be ‘manipulating the dominant community values, myths, and political institutions and procedures’ of a culture’ (p.632). They argue that this is the hidden second “face” of power’ in comparison to the more visible official decisions, e.g., to promote anti-racism through the Race Equality Charter, or pursue Athena Swan awards, argued to be the ‘safe’ side of power (p,632).

[3] Inevitably mitigated by the ‘objective merits of privilege along axes of class, impairment, gender, ethnicity, from the start of careers (Friedman and Laurison, 2019, p.2).

[4] Although it has earlier Korean origins as a children’s game, Squid Game is popularly known as a South Korean survivor horror thriller series broadcast on Netflix, based on many competitors risking their lives to escape poverty and become wealthy, winning about £28 million.

As concealed as this mobilisation of bias may be, we can get an idea of how this operates when the handling of objections or grievances is considered, especially in the disregarding of complaints within universities (Ahmed, 2021; Hensen and Nilsson, 2022) and also in the explicit decisions made to withdraw publications which spoke of these abuses of power, i.e., Pritchard and Edwards' book on sexual misconduct in academia due to threatened legal action from a senior academic, in relation to sexual gatekeeping. [5]

Savage has expressed pessimism as to how the homogeneity of academia can be changed, questioning how the 'ongoing reproduction of the middle classes is to be seriously challenged' (2003, 541). In more recent publications, he has also placed some faith in new paradigms which explore class and identity in more nuanced ways, especially through Bourdieusian concepts of habitus (Savage and Friedman, 2015). This focus on culture reverberates in much recent research on the experiences of marginalised and precarious academics (e.g., Peterson et al., 2012 (precarity); Waterfield et al., 2019 (class); Reay, 2002 (gender) 2021 (class), Wilde and Fish, forthcoming (disability and class). Reading across these studies as well as those on racism and academic cultures (preciously cited) it is unsurprising that academic cultures are often conceived as corrupt and 'toxic.' Indeed, Dumitrescu's (2019) piece in *Times Higher Education* provides a provocative and scathing indictment of 'upward toxicity', a satirical take on reality of shaping of the upward curve (internationality).

Although there is a growing amount of research on disabled academics, much of this has been undertaken with those who have secured a place in academic institutions; that the experience and 'hidden injuries' (Gill, 2009) of precarious academics remain less visible in such work is a significant omission. Further, it is envisaged that those potential disabled academics who face more barriers to entry are likely to have come from working-class backgrounds, given the importance of both status and income (especially the significance of poverty in compounding exclusion) in the garnering of the social and cultural capital need to present as the ideal (unencumbered) academic, as 'non-disabled' [and] permanently available' (Campbell, 2020, p.208) , in a highly competitive, inherently exclusionary field. To date there has been little research on intersections on class and disability. So, in keeping with the need for research which improves the value of disabled people's lives, the starting point for my research and this chapter is Disability Studies, which emerged in the 1980s now constituting a significant body of work which centred disabled people's experiences, culture and politics. Given the disproportionate number of disabled people who are in poverty (JRF, 2018), the theme of this book, and my own research and class background, this is blended with contributions to the study of class and HE, to provide an intersectional view of disablism in academia.

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[5] The original book and its contents page can be found here: https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/edit/10.4324/9781003289944/sexual-misconduct-academia-delyth-edwards-erin-pritchard. A statement on the withdrawal can be found here: https://newsroom.taylorandfrancisgroup.com/statement-on-sexual-misconduct-in-academia/

Thus, the remainder of this chapter synthesises data from a current research project on class-based disablism drawing on my own (updated) ten-year autoethnographic research as a disabled academic. The analysis will be based on my own ethnography, drawing briefly on a triangulation of data from the current research projects; documentary analysis of interviews with disabled staff and those recruiting roles in academia, with the experiences of precarious disabled academics at centre-stage. It focuses attention on the systemic, known yet often unacknowledged, academic practices that work to maintain, perpetuate, and exacerbate the experiences, and normative trajectories expected of academics, illustrating the impacts on those who are deemed as an irregular fit, and their places in the 'ableist imaginary' theorised by Campbell (2020, p.208).

The eventual goal is to show that this is a crucial area for study and action, if we are to properly understand the nuances of processes of exclusion, in the academic workforce, and to contribute to real strategies for change. I will begin with parts of my ethnography, which will allow myself to 'write [ ] myself into the analysis' (Thomas, 1999, p.68). It is intended to acknowledge the 'situated knowledges' (Haraway, 1991) which have shaped my approach to transparent forms of knowledge production.

My auto-ethnographical approach

This is an evocative (Gergen and Gergen, 2018) auto-ethnography conducted from a PhD in 2004 to 2014 (through diaries, and record-keeping of job application documents). I have used some of this data to open conversations rather than to provide answers. As Gergen and Gergen (2008) explain, an evocative ethnography helps to go 'beyond conventional accounts of "what there is" to forms of representation calling forth "what could be" (p.275), from '"aboutness to "withness"' (p.276). Significantly, it allows for more embodied and affective understandings of those who are 'wayfaring' (Gergen and Gergen, 2028) the precarious routes of academic terrain, e.g., in strong contrast to the more descriptive, 'objective' explanations of precarity; e.g. the University and College Union's (UCU) fact-based language which is perhaps at its most emotive in the following statement 'Casualisation is bad for staff and bad for education, yet it's endemic in our colleges and universities' (2024, para 1), saying nothing about the distribution of these 'bads', their causes and the relevant groups and individuals were affected.

However, it can be seen as a critical ethnography (Munhall, 2012, p.289) in its capacity to explore power relations, focused (p.291) in its centring of disablism, with elements of micro-ethnography (p.292) in its emphasis on the meaning of discrete interactions within the wider cultural context of academia. This consisted of collecting job applications and associated materials and keeping a diary on my experience and talking informally with other disabled academics.

I began this ethnography intending it would help me with my own postdoctoral 'hidden injuries' (Gill, 2009), especially the humiliations and heavy burdens of a precarious, marginal status. These included

the interactions with potential employers, and the onerous workload that the cycle of paid and unpaid speculative work and the treadmill of applications exacted on my body and mind. This study lasted ten years, until I gained my first 'permanent' job[6]. As suggested, my analysis also draws briefly on recent interviews with disabled academics, showing emerging patterns, and analysis of data from academics and professional services staff, and their thoughts on the recruitment of precarious, working-class, and disabled staff, and the intersections between these aspects of identity and experience. First, I will provide some background context.

My ethnography

When I was in my forties, a senior academic (social gerontologist), in an interview for a Research Fellow on a study on ageism, posed the following question:

> 'Normally at this stage in the interview I would ask you how you believe this post would fit into your career trajectory, but in your case, I can see that the question is inappropriate – so can you just tell me why you want this job?'

I knew, at this instant, that I wouldn't get the job. It felt like confirmation of the suspicions I'd had, that my failure to get academic posts depended less on my publications, research, or teaching skills and more on the way I presented as a the 'right kind' of 'early career researcher' (ECR). This interview vindicated all the feelings which led me to experience what colleagues colloquially refer to as 'imposter syndrome' or, more accurately "self-elimination" Friedman and Laurison (2019). This, for me, is experienced as being too impaired and too late. It echoes the experiences of many who feel they stand outside the privileged walls of academia, but I want to argue that it is disabled people, as prospective employees, who are wounded even more deeply by what Rosalind Gill has called the 'hidden injuries of neo-liberal academia.' For many people with impairments, this is literal, with most disabled academics reporting that they become ill through the impossible expectations and the varying ways in which universities fail in their duties to provide reasonable adjustments[7] (Brown and Leigh, 2020; Wilde and Fish. forthcoming)

Further, the wide variety of deficit-led remarks I had received in interviews led me to believe that my class background came to the fore when I did get interviewed. Whereas being disabled may tick a diversity box, I was largely seen in terms of low cultural capital, which seemed to be linked primarily to my Northern accent (Donnelly et al., 2019) and late entry to academia, a significant transgression of the upward curve. Moreover, it matters where you begin. One such example was a leading, impressive, academic on inclusive education, asked me, with a clear facial expression of disgust, why I went to such

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[6] It wasn't. I was made redundant in 2019.

[7] See legislation.go.uk (2024) for an explanation of employer responsibilities under the UK Equality Act 2010: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/section/20

a 'low-level' college to do my degree. This is not an isolated incident, for myself or others, as I found talking to research participants, and informal spaces, over the years.

Gill (2009) speaks of the secret conversations in academia as revealing exhaustion, stress, overload, insomnia, anxiety, shame, aggression, hurt, guilt, and feelings of out-of-placeness, fraudulence and fear of exposure. And she points out that "the experiences of academics have somehow largely escaped critical attention" (2009, p.40) despite the burgeoning of reflexivity in scholarly thought. Whilst this is true for many who work within universities, the practices and processes which work to exclude prospective disabled staff in such cultures have been less likely to receive critical attention by universities and researchers, as suggested, and are likely to remain in place, unacknowledged, or unknown.

It is unsurprising then that barriers in academia are often conceptualised as ableist boundaries by researchers in this area, e.g., those who have contributed to Brown and Leigh's collection (2020). Williams and Magillvin (2013) advocate the need understand career boundaries, rather than focussing on barriers to disabled people and specific impairment issues. This seems advisable if we are to get to the causes of ableist or disablist culture which excludes, and often stymies entry.

Disability Studies, Sociology, and disabled people in academia

Despite the progress made in policy aimed to improve disabled peoples' lives, in the 1990s, the number of disabled people in universities remains low, though it has increased in recent years. Around 16% of the UK workforce are disabled. However, this is true of only about 6% of the workforce in HE.[8]

The relatively sparse number of disabled people in the academic workforce, especially in "permanent" jobs is a significant issue for all disabled academics I have spoken with. These concerns are inextricably linked to a significant political matter which has been there from the start of Disability Studies in the 1980s, the place of disabled people in relation to the academy, research, and especially in disability studies (Linton,1988; Branfield, 1998). Oliver (1992) recommended that the study of disablism should focus on the cultures which perpetuate discrimination rather than disabled people's shortcomings, with many disability studies scholars insisting that disabled people should lead agendas/the disability movement (Oliver and Barnes, 2010). In a workforce which tends to marginalise disabled people, one might expect that Disability Studies would provide a promising niche for disabled social scientists and cognate subjects. While Disability Studies has flourished since the 1990s (Jarman and Kafer, 2014),

[8] https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/the-employment-of-disabled-people-2024/the-employment-of-disabled-people-2024 ; https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/uklabourmarket/latest ; https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/staff/table-2#note

and a large growth in studies of ableism[9] the issue of disabled people's involvement within this is unclear, and the question of who is studying who, and what that means for the theory and research production remains somewhat uncertain (Wilde and Fish, 2024). But it is significant that many disabled people remain on the margins of academic employment and that the experiences of prospective disabled academics do not occupy a prominent place on current research agendas. Currently, I am in a probationary year social sciences role but have never gained an interview for, or a job in Disability Studies, despite holding a doctorate in Disability Studies. Conversations with other disabled academics reveal that this is common.

Kitchin (2000) did research with thirty-five disabled people to elicit their views on disabled people in research, finding that there was a strong desire for disabled people to play more active roles in research. Whilst many would argue that this goal of 'ownership' is likely to promote false dichotomies of non-disabled and disabled people, Branfield's (1998) hotly contested call for the recognition of a group identity and a central position for disabled people (as a political statement based on collective oppression) seems especially relevant in this era.

There are many worries that the field is dominated by non-disabled researchers (Wilde and Fish, 2024). My own experiences, and conversations with other disabled academics suggest that this is due to wider systems, practices, and cultural norms, alongside the deployment of criteria which have restricted approaches to equality and equity – emphasising opportunity rather than outcome. I now turn to my own account to examine some of the conditions of possibility for entry, and progression.

My account

Going back the initial quote, about my abnormal status as an older prospective employee, it seems that age played a fundamental part in my rejection as the non-normative candidate. However, this is more complex. By this time, I had completed two postdoctoral research fellowships, equipping me well for the post. My age, late entry and ongoing precarity were inextricably linked to my experiences as a disabled person – factors I share with many other disabled people, particularly those from less advantaged backgrounds who have struggled to enter HE as a student. For me, my progression from a 'mature student' to a PhD candidate was a long one, with primary obstacles presented by my impairment, my social background, and, later, from my urgent need to earn money to support my family as a single parent of three children.

The idea of employing older candidates for entry level jobs jar with many employers, given the common association of ECRs being younger candidates; I have called potential employers frequently, to check eligibility, where mention of suitability for younger people is in the job specification. However, even

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[9] Ableism is usually taken to mean the dominance of norms organised around a non-disabled normality which "inaugurates the norm" instituting "the reification
and classification of populations" (Kumari Campbell, 2017)

where this is not specified, the expectation that good academics or future ‘stars’ are ascending the curve consolidates the lowly positions of who cannot leave the cycle of contract research. The comparison is stark, with the latter group often characterised as ‘dim dross,’ especially working-class women (Reay, 2002). Significantly, these designations are reflected closely in the funding body schemes which fuel, support, and legitimise academic hierarchies, in the eligibility criteria related to early, mid, and senior career grants; the idea of ‘stars’ was even embedded in the title of one opportunity[10].

Disabled people seem to have more success at gaining research positions than lecturing posts. As Filer (2013) noted, the idea of an ECR carries with it a status of ‘not yet there’ and a consequent lack of legitimacy. My participation in contract researchers’ events has confirmed her point that people in such positions usually fear speaking out against systemic discrimination; thus, things stay the same. Informal conversations about being stuck in contract research with few opportunities for promotion are common. Gill (2009) demonstrates that ECR posts can be a lifelong designation, given the increasing casualisation, lack of development or secure employment opportunities. It is also common to hear disabled and working-class people being advised that they should stop trying to gain permanent employment in a system which is searching for stars.

Fewer possibilities for promotion on fixed-term contracts is compounded by time spent on completing applications and gaining new skills for your next job - in the face of probable unemployment. Until December 2013, I spent about ten hours a week filling in job applications, alongside a full-time job, leaving little time for writing, or applying for research proposals. For those disabled people who have academic work, escaping this cycle is difficult, often being rejected for interviews and posts which they are over-qualified for. The idea that researchers employed on the lower points of the academic scale will be young and super-flexible is pervasive, also borne out in many job specifications and assumptions made of research assistants, e.g., that this will do anything from making tea to solving research design flaws. Interview panels often question the time spent in research contracts, deeming the candidate less suitable for teaching posts, perpetuating fundamental barriers to permanent contracts. This prohibits or delays opportunities for many, especially those who have been ill-served by the education system, working-class people, and/ or who, like me, face many obstacles presented by disabling academic cultures. Hansen (2002) speaks of the ‘hidden geographies’ faced by disabled people, where people ‘battle’ with space, environment, and time (at home and work) to present themselves as competent workers.

Academia’s apparent disregard for, or even exploitation, of the extreme conditions of employment which accompany the intensification, acceleration, and extensification of ‘fast academia’ (Vostal,

[10] The British Academy’s Rising Star scheme, now discontinued.

2016), may exacerbate any assumptions that academic posts are unsuitable for disabled people. As one PI said to me in our first meeting, after discussing minor adjustments ‘these equal opportunities processes are annoying – if I’d ‘ve known you were disabled at the beginning we’d have employed somebody more suitable.’ It is evident then, that a person with a more noticeable impairment would probably have been rejected after their interview. I usually ‘pass’ as non-disabled, but many interview nerves have been wasted on worrying whether I can stand for the duration of the presentation, without falling. As many research participants told me, it is also a dilemma to decide whether to disclose as it impossible to tell the bias of interviewers. A senior disabled academic warned me - ‘you would stand a better chance of getting an academic post if you stopped disclosing that you were disabled.’ And that’s not even to speak of the class issues which pervade my embodiment and my CV, hidden in plain sight, especially accent, cultural capital and a lowly start to academia.

My former PI’s comments about the need to avoid employing a disabled person hints at the avoidance of employing disabled people. There seems to be a fear here that any adjustments made will disrupt the normal business of academic life, posing unnecessary risks to the smooth running of the institution. These practices also reflect centrality of Gill’s (2009) diagnosis of the 'compulsory individuality' of academia, and the acceptance of the idea that individuals are now increasingly required to tell the story of their lives as if they were the outcome of deliberative planning and choice’. Here, there is no room for adventitious happenings such as impairment and disability. It seems that this anticipated interference with normal academic life is somehow recast as ‘difficult difference,’ justifying exclusion (Rogers, 2007) despite commitments to diversity and inclusion.

Appeals to diversity

Initially, I had been glad to see that some universities used ‘positive discrimination,’ in the form of guaranteed interview schemes if you meet the minimum requirements – the two-ticks scheme, replaced in 2023 by the Disability Confident scheme (with a guaranteed interview promised at the second level of the latter). I saw this as a reasonable way to address issues of equality of opportunity. However, I have realised that non-disclosure is best. I have found that I am far more likely to get interviewed if I don’t disclose, and even less likely to get an interview if I apply under the two ticks, recommended interview scheme. I have never gained a job through these schemes, applying for four posts using it, receiving one interview despite matching the criteria - on two occasions universities apologised for not short-listing me, awarding me an interview after my request. On the first occasion I accepted but declined the second time – this was because my addition as a disabled candidate may well have contributed to humiliating forms of hostility in the way I was treated. I really didn’t want to experience this again. After my presentation, I was asked to defend why disabled people should get ‘special treatment’ when applying for jobs, with reference to the physical differences between me and the academic who posed the question. The other university told me I had not met the criteria and could give

me no evidence of why they considered this to be the case. In both cases, the successful candidate seemed had less experience than me, one in the final stages of their PhD.

Since my PhD, gained in 2004, I have applied for an average of 2-3 jobs a month over the first period of 10 years, well over 300 posts (this had reached a thousand by 2024). My success rate at getting interviews is good, having had interviews for about a third of these. I admittedly started out with very poor interviewing skills and low confidence in myself, subconsciously self-sabotaging through self-elimination, far more common for working-class and disabled people. As Friedman and Laurison (2019) have demonstrated, this is undeniable related to cultural norms which continually reinforce that you don't belong.

However, the expectation of 'compulsory individuality' translates into many aspects of disabled people's careers and fails to acknowledge the discrimination many of us may find in our search for work. There were small gaps in my employment and I was unable, for example, to continue teaching in the final year of my PhD as a single parent of three children, which meant I could not stay on as a Teaching Assistant, rendering me unemployed with something that cannot be translated onto my CV as a positive deliberate choice. Similar constraints are likely to affect anyone experiencing poverty, and/or with an impairment or caring responsibilities who is doing a PhD, leading us back to the need to critically reflect on what our assumptions of an academic are. For me, it has been a long struggle to gain work, then to move from short-term contracts, but it is equally common for people to give up their ambitions to be an academic.

It has also become common for academics to move long distances to find work. Despite the excessive burdens that such moves may mean for many disabled people (not least in finding suitable accommodation, new support networks and forms of personal assistance), disabled academics I have spoken to have had to take these risks to work, often moving from towns and countries, even continents, to grasp these opportunities. From personal experience, this poses new barriers to work and living, alongside the high financial costs involved (my own losses amounted to around £40,000). It also involves making oneself exceptionally vulnerable in the investment made, a fundamental fact of inequality which middle-class academics are unlikely to consider (Friedman and Laurison, 2019). Moreover, many disabled academics consider the act of asking for greater forms of inclusion to be too audacious a move, an exceptionally risky strategy when they are already aware that they're fortunate to have entered a middle-class space. As one person told me: 'I feel like I should already be grateful that they've hired a working-class person without asking for more' (Wilde and Fish, forthcoming).

To conclude

Academic life is replete with disabling practices and processes. The structures of doctoral study have normative expectations embedded within them, which pose great obstacles to anyone who is unable to exploit all academic opportunities and demand recognition, especially as a non-disabled, rational, self-actualising agent (seemingly deemed to have no other responsibilities impinging on their time). It would be impossible to do justice to the diversity of recommendations made by the disabled participants and those involved in recruitment in our current study, especially as each one gave between two and ten ideas for change, but in brief, these revolved around two different polarities. First, most people believed that these problems are deep-rooted, embedded in the relations of research production, career building and the normalisation of academic fiefdoms, nepotism, patronage, and the designation of academic stars (on normative grounds of age, time elapsed, and bodily 'attractiveness') and the conservative and unjust practices of research funding. Second, there were many practical suggestions; these included a multitude of food ideas, from shortening the initial average application time from around a week to less than ten minutes and giving honest feedback, valuing experiences and transferable skills which differed from their own- a good addition rather than a good fit, and an appreciation of those who are committed to research or teaching quality with or without the 'normal' signifiers of aspiration.

I have argued that candidates with impairments face forms of disablement and discrimination which are at odds with what Gill has referred to as the 'technologies of selfhood 'that bring into being the endlessly 'self-monitoring, planning, prioritising 'responsibilised' subject required by the contemporary University' (2009, p.231). There are many scholars who have demonstrated the barriers to involvement in academia, from the disablist 'social relations of research production' (1992) described by Oliver, to the time barriers faced by many disabled people by Hansen. I have hardly scratched the surface in the few examples I have given; there are crucial areas of concern such as impairment-based bullying, and the rigid expectations of people based on imperatives of neurotypicality, the impact of working where working long hours is the norm (based on the 'normative' demanding expectations of time use), and of course the impact that the continuing marginalisation of disabled people has on the production of knowledge, teaching and learning.

Perhaps more importantly, given the varied and amorphous boundaries we face to inclusion and our place in maintaining the status quo - what should those of us who are fortunate enough to have got into the academy do to change things? I hope I've provided some of the reasons why we should all do something, especially when so few people get there, who probably should. I count myself fortunate as a disabled, working-class person who (finally) got in – and I'm not going to keep the silence.

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