Welcome! Everything is fine.

'Fitting in to the machine':
Academics' experiences of institutional (un)belonging in contemporary English higher education

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Structure

1. **Higher education (HE) context:** The transition from the ivory tower to the neoliberal marketplace;

2. **PhD project overview:** *'No-one's safe': Gendered competitiveness, cultures of inequality, and academics' experiences of belonging in precarious English higher education*

3. **Concepts:** hegemonic masculinity, the hegemonic academic, and unbelonging

4. **Data analysis:** (Un)belonging by bureaucracy – how academics are made (il)legible through administrative apparatuses.

Contemporary English HE

1989: Full grants removed (except for low-income students)

1992: Polytechnic colleges granted university status (commonly referred to now as 'ex-polys' or 'post-92' institutions); Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) introduced

1998: Undergraduate tuition fees introduced in England (c. £1000 per year)

2006: Fees raised to c. £3000

2012: Fees raised to c. £9000

2014: RAE replaced with Research Excellence Framework (REF)

2015: Student number controls abolished

2018: Strikes over proposed reforms to pensions in the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS)

2019: Strikes over casualisation and/or USS

2020: Further strikes over casualisation and/or USS; REF cenus date and submission

2021: REF results

- Increased competition to recruit students to raise tuition and accommodation fee income;

- Extra pressure to achieve good REF results to receive more QR funding = greater scrutiny of current and prospective academic staff in REF terms: do they 'help' or 'harm' the submission?;

- Heightened need to win external funding for research activity = staff incited to write more grant applications and measured by income targets, increasing sector-wide competition for finite resources;

- 'Transformation' schemes – i.e. voluntary and/or mandatory redundancy;

- Selloff of core teaching and office spaces (leading to extended teaching hours, office sharing, etc.), creation of more student accommodation;

- Prioritisation of the 'student experience' over staff wellbeing (National Student Survey results!);

- Obsession with metrics and league table standing;

- Individualised culture of competition – between and within higher education institutions (HEIs).

Consequences

Participant interviews

- Recruited in two waves through calls on Twitter and Facebook, direct approaches, referral from existing networks, and snowballing

- Semi-structured interviews with 29 academic staff, lasting between 1h and 2h45m

- 15 men and 14 women purposively sampled from 105 potential interviewees

- Broad spectrum of disciplines, socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnicities, and ages

- Career stages from fixed-term postdocs to senior staff with management responsibilities, including four recently ex-academics

- Different university types, rankings, disciplinary foci, geographical locations, and age (all public)

- Data generated between December 2017 and October 2018 in three waves: pilot interviews December 2017; substantive interviews February-May and July-September 2018

Competitiveness:

Hegemonic masculinity

'Hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men.'

(Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 832)

Neoliberalism 'can function as a form of masculinity politics largely because of the powerful role of the state in the gender order.'

(Connell 2014, 1816)

Publishing papers in 'top' journals

Winning research grants

Gaining permanent employment

Being (quickly) promoted through the ranks

Making Professor

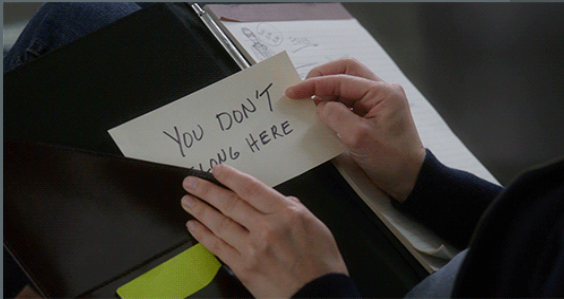Yielding accolades, prizes, and titles

H-index

Keynotes

(External) markers of success

Impostor syndrome & (un)belonging

Impostor syndrome:

A 'condition' in which one (more often a woman) fears being 'exposed' as a 'fraud' who does not deserve their position or qualification(s), usually in a professional context.

Unbelonging:

A feeling of being out of place, dislocated, alienated, marginal, unwelcome, liminal, uncomfortable, insecure, unsafe, disconnected, untethered.

Can be environmental or situational, therefore is mutable, contingent, contextual, and unstable – one may feel a great sense of belonging and professional confidence in their teaching room with their students, for instance, and 10 minutes later feel so alienated in a staff meeting that they doubt their place in HE.

Legibility zones

Bureaucratic: intelligibility within administrative and institutional structures, such as having a university affiliation, a certain type of contract, etc.

Ideological: intelligibility as someone holding certain perspectives on the world, particularly around the function and value of HE, what an academic 'is,' etc.

Embodied: intelligibility through certain physical and identity features, including dress, comportment, accent, etc.

The Hegemonic Academic

- Masculine
- White (Anglophone)
- Middle-class+
- Able-bodied
- Geographically mobile
- Securely employed on a 'standard' academic contract
- Heterosexual (either married or free of caring responsibilities)
- Politically left of centre (varies slightly by discipline)
- Lack of work/life distinction – academia is a vocation
- Highly visible/self-promotional
- Etc., etc.

Employment status and contract type:
'Nobody really knows what to do with me'

Not the holy grail

'I wonder if it's a sort of **a self-perpetuating cycle**, like you go to an interview and you've already got an affiliation, you're more likely to get the job than if you go in and you're an independent scholar.'

(Participant 11)

'[M]y role before I left, it was teaching, research, and admin **as everybody's is.**'

(Participant 13)

'[My role is] **not the holy grail** of, you know, 100% full-time etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. It's something that I'm happy with, a compromise, now but [...] **I had to let go of all kinds of ideas about academia and my place in it.**'

(Participant 2)

'it's **harder to have an identity as a good teacher** [as a Teaching Fellow] that is kind of **validated** than it used to be. I mean you can still do that if you want and to kind of sacrifice being in the REF and, but I think **it's harder to kind of maintain capital** within the department, also I think in the wider academic community.'

(Participant 24)

Part-time working

'[I]f you were part-time there was a slight **culture of blame** for not really being there. [...] [I]t was always criticised in meetings and things like that.'

(Participant 6)

'Once I got there more and was permanently at the university, obviously I became more of an integrated member of staff at that point. And **I did have my own office and my own desk, and that made a huge difference**.'

(Participant 7)

'I still don't feel like I get treated as a member of staff, because people don't really know what my job is. [...] It's like [the institution] wasn't geared up to have people like me working on these projects, so **nobody really knows what to do with me**.'

(Participant 16)

'when I was a part-time lecturer, I once worked for four months without a contract. [...] And despite my best efforts, sometimes, I can tell you someone this week is working and they're not contracted yet and [...] 12 years since I went through that experience **the university still can't move quickly enough to get people onto contract** for the start of term.'

(Participant 28)

Precarity, insecurity, and compliance:
'A permanent job is not a permanent job'

Precarity throughout the career trajectory

'[T]here's a lot of focus on the casualised, the younger end of doctoral and post-doctoral researchers not getting full-time permanent contracts, but **there's a lot of very quiet voluntary severance,** voluntary redundancy, and compulsory redundancy going on at the so-called late-career end of the spectrum. **A permanent job is not a permanent job.** I'm here [at this institution] because I was made redundant in 2001. [...] [Y]ou get the permanent job. You think "right ok finally I can do this." And then along **they come and get rid of you** anyway.' (Participant 15)

'I feel that **the future is very uncertain for me** and yet presumably from the outside I would look like a person who has in place the traditional academic career. [...] [W]ho are these people who feel like the future is secure? Because I don't know any of them, or if I do I think those people might not be very awake or alert because **the future I don't think is very secure for anybody.** [...] I worry when it comes to ECRs [Early Career Researchers] that people think that they'll get a permanent post and it will be all right and that precarity will be gone, and that's not true. **It just changes in its nature.'** (Participant 5)

Compliance

'I find myself recently increasingly minding my Ps and Qs in terms of **conforming to the culture**. And demonstrably performing as per the right attitude. So **it's like a role-play exercise** as soon as I step onto campus. So you know, there are choices in that. And they are **survival choices**. They are "I want to keep my job" choices. And where I've not done that and I've been told off […] it's incredibly threatening because it just leaves you, you know, kind of paranoid basically about, "oh am I going to lose my job?" So at the moment **they can kind of yank my chains** and just do whatever they want.'

(Participant 15)

'[Y]ou sometimes just think, "**the only thing that I have with this place** is my kind of ability to finish or complete this in good time and in a good way **so I get a good reference**. So I can't screw that up." And I was brought up that way as well: "you're an immigrant, you're already **different, don't make waves.**"'

(Participant 23)

Overwork and hyperproduction:
‘We don't have to give people time to do this because they'll do it anyway'

Cultures of overwork

'I quite like it [working extra hours] because I really like my job and I really like doing it. When I sit down and write a paper on a Saturday, I don't really feel like I'm at work. Because it's more of a vocation for me than anything else, so I don't mind it, I quite like it. And a lot of the time I work on the weekend, or late at night. I don't think I have to. It's not like anybody is telling me I've got to. It's my own self-imposed working.'

(Participant 18)

'When people talk about how they don't take days off even if they're ill and they don't take weekends off and they work all evening even if they don't necessarily have to [...] I think that just normalises some really damaging ways of working. But sometimes you feel like you're a failure if you're not meeting those standards.'

(Participant 16)

JWB: 'Do you think there would be consequences if you didn't finish as many papers? Whilst you say no-one's telling you, I wonder whether, how the love of it intersects with the need in some sense to fulfil those roles?'

P18: 'Yeah. So I think there would be consequences. [...] [Y]ou wouldn't go up as quick as you would if you didn't write as many. And I wouldn't have got the lectureship after, you know, PhD plus three [years] [...] if I hadn't written the amount of papers I did, because I was working sort of six or seven days.'

(Participant 18)

Time, pressure, measurement

'[W]hen my partner was very ill the first time, I was also at the stage of writing up PhD and papers. And there was some quite novel data and I had to sort of step back because **I knew I couldn't analyse it and write it up in the time required** for it to retain its novelty. So I had to pass it on to a colleague. And **that simple thing of not being first author** on a paper…'

(Participant 9)

'[I] just **constantly have a sense of drowning**. […] [I]t's possible to just feel like **I should have done more**. All the time. Yeah. I should have written a book by now. I could have used my maternity leave for a book. Somebody advised me to do that.'

(Participant 14)

'[I] just **always feel like I'm not doing enough** despite, you know, the facts proving the opposite.[…] I think as well largely what it is, I'm now in an environment **where I'm constantly being asked what I'm doing** in a way that I never was before. […]

[T]he constant justification is hard. I resist it and also, you know, or try and resist it, but also hear that voice in my head, **"you're not doing enough,"** you know, **"you're not working hard enough, you don't care enough** about your students, you're not," you know, "you're not doing the right kind of research".'

(Participant 27)

Inequality of value

'A lot of the courses can't run without people with professional qualifications. So you could put pressure on them and say "you need to do 70 hours to do research," but you know they can go and get a job somewhere else where they won't put that pressure on them, so you don't. So what you do is instead you put more pressure on the people without professional qualifications, who've just got a PhD, to turn out five outputs, four stars each.'

(Participant 8)

'[Staff with professional qualifications] know I would struggle to replace them, so I can't line manage them in the same way as I would somebody else. And that causes all sorts of tensions because the other staff think "how come I've got all these pressures for research outputs and" – let's call them Bob – "and Bob doesn't seem to have any pressure for research outputs? And how come I joined as an L [Lecturer] on a two-year fixed-term contract, but Bob joined as an SL [Senior Lecturer] at the top of the pay scale and doesn't have any of this?" So even in the same department you can have all of these variances.'

(Participant 8)

Metrics and comparison:
'Numerical measures on things that aren't numerical'

Failure

'I **never feel like I measure up** against their metric system.'

(Participant 5)

'I definitely did [feel like I was failing] in those two years of being a Lecturer full-time. I think I felt fine for a certain amount and then **I just felt overwhelmed** and, you know, **I'd been given performance measures to meet that were ridiculous**, that I knew were ridiculous at the time of being set. So there was a level of **feeling that I was failing**, even though I kind of, I knew that I was failing against the metrics, I knew I wasn't failing.'

(Participant 24)

Competition

'You always think you're rubbish and you're **not as good as everybody else** and that kind of stuff. Not quite impostor syndrome but there's a level of **self-comparison** and how that's kind of **played upon by institutions**. Well, explicitly used as **a way to measure you against other colleagues**.'

(Participant 9)

'[C]rude measures which have been stretched way beyond anything reasonable. People are talking, you know, **they think you're better because there's a difference in the fourth decimal place of something**. […] And it's using numerical measures on things that aren't numerical.'

(Participant 21)

Roles and responsibilities:
'You end up feeling like the mother in every conceivable situation'

'[I]f your incentives are, you know, there's very little money available. Basically there's scarcity. There's a scarcity of resources and we will apportion those resources by these metrics. **People then start to work according to those metrics in order to get the resources.** It's not great but **bad systems produce bad things.'**

(Participant 17)

'[Y]ou can see within departments, you'll have a backbone of people who are, who keep things running, and then you'll see **people who are dodging anything that doesn't advance them personally.'**

(Participant 21)

Incentives

'[Y]ou can see it happening that **some people are being tailored** to, you know, toward promotion and so they get the good roles, **they get the things that will count**. And, you know, things that don't count like programme leadership or, you know, year guidance tutor or whatever, these won't count towards anything for promotion. And so people that get given those or are asked to do those… **you know where you fit already**.'

(Participant 13)

'I've been on lots of promotion panels and it's great when they say, "oh this person's done lots of good things for the discipline. This person's done fantastic things for other historians and been on the radio often." That's all really good, fantastic. But like, "**has she got the next monograph** which is really good?" And **if the answer is no, she doesn't get the promotion**.'

(Participant 22)

What/who is valued

'Some chap came to ask me to do this thing because **he knew that I would put my own things second and I would put other people's things first**, and I do. […] [I]t seems like **it's a bunch of women looking after all these men**, right, propping them up, doing the basic sensible day-to-day structural things so that they can get on with feeling important. […] **[Y]ou end up feeling like the mother in every conceivable situation.**'

(Participant 5)

'[T]hey were talking about personal tutoring and that **there's always someone in the department who ends up with all of the students going to them**, and they were talking about this person being **the "mother."** And I said, "well aren't you effectively acknowledging that all this **personal tutoring is gendered** and it all gets pushed on to the women in the department, and then **that's great for the men in the department, because they can get on with the important stuff?"'**

(Participant 8)

Gendered roles

Thank you for listening!

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