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The normative expectations of academics and class-based disablism in Higher Education

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Research Domains

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Abstract

Despite a growing amount of research on disabled academics, the experience and 'hidden injuries' of precarious academics remain less visible in such work, which is a significant omission. To date there has been little research on intersections on class and disability in recruitment and beyond, the starting points for my research and this paper.

The paper emerges from a current research project on class-based disablism. It draws on documentary analysis of academic job advertisements, interviews with disabled staff, and those recruiting roles in academia, placing the current study on precarious disabled academics at centre-stage. It focuses attention on the systemic, known yet often unacknowledged, academic practices that work to perpetuate and exacerbate the experiences of disabled academics.

I show why this is a crucial area if we are to properly understand processes of exclusion, both from and in the academic workforce, and to contribute to real strategies for change.

Full paper

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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. Thus, some experiences and 'hidden injuries' (Gill, 2009) of precarious academics remain less visible in such work, 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, e.g. in gaining the social and cultural capital needed to present as the ideal academic, a 'non-disabled, permanently available 'unencumbered worker' (Kumari-Campbell, 2020, 208), in a highly competitive, inherently exclusionary field. To date there has been little research on intersections on class and disability, the starting point for my research and this paper.

The paper focuses on data collected from a current research project on class-based disablism, drawing on my own ten-year autoethnographic research as a disabled academic. The final analysis will be based on a triangulation of data; documentary analysis of academic job advertisements, two sets of interviews with disabled staff (three months apart), and in those recruiting roles in academia. However, it places 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 of disabled people, especially in attempting to fulfill the normative trajectories expected of academics.

The eventual goal is to show that this is a crucial area for study and action, if we are to properly understand processes of exclusion, in the academic workforce, and to contribute to real strategies for change.

At this very early stage of the study, the analysis is based on preliminary themes arising from the first twelve interviews with disabled academics, showing emerging patterns. The overall study has recruited 40 disabled participants, an over-recruitment of ten, allowing for any withdrawals. It is noteworthy that the majority of these people got in touch within three days of a call for participants, with 40 recruits within five days. All participants, so far, seem grateful for the opportunity to tell their stories, particularly when I ask a them to tell me a personal story which is indicative of their position within academia.

The disabled academics (incuding those who hold secure positions. to ECRs, and those who have ambitions to be an academic but have not gained positions) have been recruited from around the world, and the UK. So far these have included people with physical, and sensory impairments, mental health diagnoses, communication-based impairments, autistic and other neurodivergent people, and there are more women than men. People are not asked to reveal gender identity, though, so far, there is at least one who identifies as non-binary. There is considerable ethnic diversity, perhaps indicating the significance of intersectional failures. Indeed, this issue has already emerged in discussions, reflecting the propensity for EDI policies to take a silo view to diversity, rather than a convergent approach, although both have their drawbacks as James Thomas (2020) has pointed out, both tending to result in 'hollow diversity'.

 Class-based disablism is also very apparent in all the interviews so far. No direct questions were asked on class, and a decision was made to recruit from all economic and cultural backgrounds, adding to the significance of these early findings. Even those participants who regard themselves as 'very middle class', have reflected on comparative privilege, e.g., comments about being 'lucky enough to have parents who provide financial support', and the impossibility of even doing doctoral study, or facing unemployment or strategic employment decisions without this. One final key area of debates so far, is the harm done by lengthy, monologic recruitment processes, and the despair felt in being on a 'hamster wheel' of never-ending applications, stigmating experiences, and continual dents made in confidence. There are overall anxieties about the futility of pursuing their aspirations, despite the clear dedication the participants show towardsv academic endeavours (teaching /research)

The majority of interviewees suggest that disabled academics who have less economic advantage face immense barriers to being an academic, which include precarious housing (e.g., a hostel) and balancing low-paid work with the many forms of academic experiences they know they need to possess to 'get in'. Further, most participants, so far have underlined the importance of their exclusion from academic networks, deemed crucial to acceptance as an academic.

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