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5 Article

6 Legibility Zones: An Empirically-Informed Framework for 7 Considering Unbelonging and Exclusion in Contemporary English 8 Academia

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14 **Abstract**

15 This paper introduces a new, empirically-derived conceptual framework for considering exclusion in English
16 higher education (HE): legibility zones. Drawing on interviews with academic employees in England, it suggests
17 that participants orientate themselves to a powerful imaginary termed the hegemonic academic. Failing to
18 align with this ideal can engender a sense of dislocation conceptualised as unbelonging. The mechanisms
19 through which hegemonic academic identity is constituted and unbelonging is experienced are mapped onto
20 three domains: the institutional, the ideological, and the embodied. The framework reveals the mutable and
21 intersecting nature of these zones, highlighting the complex dynamics of unbelonging and the attendant
22 challenge presented to inclusion projects when many apparatuses of exclusion are perceived as fundamental
23 to what HE is for, what an academic is, and how academia functions.

24 **Keywords**

25 Academia; academic staff; alienation; belonging; higher education; diversity and inclusion; impostor
26 syndrome; inequalities; unbelonging

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35 ## 1. Introduction

36 English higher education (HE) in the early 21st century is theoretically the most inclusive it has ever been.
37 Student numbers are at a peak and compared to its origins as an institution for privileged white men (Pressland
38 & Thwaites, 2017) academia is increasingly diverse (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Deem, 2003; Office for Students,
39 2020). This is a logical consequence of widened participation in the face of neoliberal expansion (Radice, 2013)
40 and perhaps too a reflection of investment in university- or sector-level initiatives coming under the umbrella
41 of "diversity and inclusion" (Ahmed, 2007, 2012).

42 This paper is more concerned with issues of exclusion, but I alight briefly on the institutional language of "D&I"
43 as I believe it frames how exclusion is thought of and who is considered excluded (and thus what the remedies
44 may be). That *exclusion* happens at all can only be inferred from the fact *inclusion* initiatives are required in
45 the first place, and I suggest that to those who engage only casually (or reluctantly) with these imperatives,
46 the discursive grouping of diversity with inclusion risks conflating the two. In this coupling, only those with
47 marginalised protected characteristics are at risk of exclusion, and there is perhaps a tendency to assume too
48 that one inevitably follows from the other: that diverse identities being present equates to their inclusion. We
49 might also question, as Sara Ahmed (2007, 2012) does, what these words really mean, who they adhere to,
50 and what they hide, especially as they circulate beyond D&I units and into common parlance. That these
51 buzzwords become part of the institutional lexicon does not necessarily mean they are paid more than lip-
52 service, and as Ahmed (2007) points out, the fatigue with their repetition is emblematic of the failure to make
53 such vocabulary redundant. As a final note, diversity and inclusion as enacted is substantially one-way: it is
54 incumbent on the "diverse" to adapt in order to be more includable (Anthias, 2018) rather than on the
55 institution to reflect the heterogeneity of its constituents by *doing* things in more diverse ways (Parker, 2007).

56 Visible presence is important. Being in the room is an imperative step on the path to being fully included—
57 and can in itself be highly disruptive to established norms (Arday, 2018). But as simple as the language may
58 make it sound, this paper is predicated on the understanding that inclusion is not the neat opposite of
59 exclusion: that it is more complex than simply "being there" or not. Inclusivity is a spectrum, not a binary; a
60 feeling, not a fact. Therefore I introduce instead a concept—"unbelonging"—with which to consider the
61 dynamics of simultaneous presence and exclusion, and unpack the many areas in which experiences of
62 unbelonging manifest into a three-part framework with the aim of developing conceptual tools to think
63 through these complexities. The theoretical architecture the paper offers responds to questions around how
64 to enrich and nuance understandings of exclusion in HE in ways that account for both individual and collective
65 experiences: the powerful effects of the systemic hegemonic imaginary, to which everyone contributes and
66 from which no-one is immune, and the deeply personalised consequences of working under this ideal, which
67 are unequally distributed. The paper draws on interview data representing the experience of academic staff
68 in England, but its findings are relevant also to students, and to some extent other (international) professional,
69 institutional, and group contexts. It is also worth noting that whilst empirical analysis forms the bedrock of the
70 article in that the concepts outlined here emerge from interview data, its offer is primarily theoretical and the
71 qualitative material performs an illustrative function.

72 I begin with a brief overview of the paper's underpinning research project and methods (section 2) before
73 moving to outline two central concepts derived from its data: the imagined ideal of the "hegemonic academic"
74 (section 3) and the experience of not matching up to it, or "unbelonging" (section 4). I then introduce the

framework of "legibility zones"; these reveal the features of the hegemonic academic by mapping the areas of academic life in which unbelonging can be evoked onto three layers: the institutional (section 5.1), the ideological (5.2), and the embodied (5.3). Through this the dynamics of exclusion are shown to be complex and contingent, and the experience of unbelonging collective. I therefore conclude that the possibility of inclusion is to some extent an illusion.

2. Methods

Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the research project from which this paper's framework derives traces the dominant norms and values of English HE at its time of transition from the exclusive "ivory tower" to what several participants branded a "sausage factory". (For an overview of the structure of UK HE and policy context of this transition please see Radice (2013) and Tight (2010).) The underlying data was generated through in-person semi-structured interviews of 60-200 minutes with 29 current or recent academic staff in 2018. English HE was selected to ensure consistency of policy environment, though experience of devolved UK and international nations was considered in composing the participant sample. Interviewees were not directly asked about the project's central themes (at that time: competition and masculinity) or given detail about the focus in advance to allow these topics to arise spontaneously. Questions instead invited reflection on the experience of being an academic, changes to this over time and place, career trajectories, conceptions of success and failure, and the relationship between self and work. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their potential to enable individual rapport and rich but flexible discussion. The breadth of participants (see 2.1.1) meant some scheduled questions were more relevant and generative for particular interviewees, and speaking to participants one-to-one enabled full anonymity to be retained, which in some cases was necessary for legal as well as professional reasons. Largely because of this anxiety around identifiability (English HE, especially in some disciplines, is a small world), I refer to participants by number (P*X*, according to the order of interview) and provide biographical details only when it seems relevant to the point of discussion (see Ahmed (2012) for a similar approach). This also foregrounds the data itself, demonstrating the universality of certain experiences and avoiding any associations that pseudonyms can carry.

As a background to both the gestation and conduct of this research there is also an inevitable element of quasi-(auto-)ethnographic observation. I have worked in higher education institutions (HEIs) since 2007 in a variety of professional services and "blended" positions not dissimilar to Manathunga's (2007) 'unhomely' academic developers, who operate in tandem with academic colleagues whilst remaining close to institutional operations. This intimate knowledge of English HEIs of different types is invaluable to understanding the implications of the interview data. However, it also makes it impossible to differentiate which aspects of my interpretation and analysis arise purely from the data and which from my cumulative experiences and conversations as an insider (Ryan-Flood & Gill, 2010). For ethical reasons, as well as to ensure this muddying does not result in misinterpretation, all participants are sent project outputs to vet how their words have been represented and analysed (so far no issues have been raised).

2.1 Sampling

An initial set of volunteer interviewees was recruited mostly via social media, yielding 105 potentials with enough diversity to constitute the full sample. Inclusion criteria required participants to be based at a public HEI in England and to hold (or have held within two years) an academic contract of any fraction or duration, which could be research- or teaching-only or a traditional lectureship (but not hourly-paid or doctoral). I

purposively selected 29 individuals with the intention of garnering a broad combination of intersections across gender, race/ethnicity, career stage, subject area, geographic location, and type of HEI (including league table position) current and previous on the assumption that from this would naturally follow diversity in other aspects of identity not polled in advance. It should be noted, however, that this is not research into "diversity" as commonly equated with marginalised identities. Participants were selected to have different biographies from each other so as to ensure a kaleidoscope of perspectives, but the final sample intentionally resembles the landscape of English HE (and England more widely) in being comprised of around 70% white academics, most of whom are also native Anglophones.

Whilst the breadth of participants and small sample precludes making generalisations about the experiences of any particular group or position, it does enable commonalities across difference to become more visible as well as meaningful disparities in the impact of universal experiences. This approach is relatively unique compared to similar HE research, which usually centres on students or particular populations/sites of inequality (e.g. women (Hoskins, 2010; Rogers, 2016); fixed-term staff (Loveday, 2017, 2018); gender and women's studies (Pereira, 2017); early-career academics (Pressland & Thwaites, 2017); manager-academics (Deem, 2003); disability (Brown & Leigh, 2020); race (Bhopal, 2016)) or considers academic culture theoretically rather than empirically (e.g. Ball, 2012; Cribb & Gewirtz, 2013; Radice, 2013).

2.2 Data Analysis

Analysis was a multi-stage process. I should also be clear that "data" in this context refers to the 400,000 words of interview transcripts rather than formal ethnography, and those words are inseparable from the circumstances in which they were spoken. I travelled to the majority of interviews so as to experience the institutional atmosphere, and accordingly have vivid embodied memories of not just the meetings but the sense of place. This is not data in any quantifiable way and yet it informs both interview and analysis: there is a difference between the few interviews that took place in meeting rooms at King's College London, intercalated with my working day, and those that were an "event". So although "analysis" began when transcripts started coming in, inevitably reflection had already occurred. It bears noting, too, that both this early analysis and the more systematic process later were (and continue to be) inflected by my position as an insider and the understandings this generates (Ryan-Flood & Gill, 2010). While the project is still being written up, this is ongoing; for example, the data from interviews with the three participants who worked at small specialist institutions has new significance for me after recently working in a conservatoire myself.

Transcript analysis was aided by Atlas.ti. Data was first manually tagged for subject matter and themes relevant to the research questions (e.g. "gender", "promotion", "bullying", "success", "the ideal") then autocoded to assess the frequency of key words (e.g. "anxiety" (156), "brutal" (30), "competition" (31)). I then reviewed all transcripts in hard copy, highlighting and annotating sections that did not lend themselves to a short keyword. From this process I derived a picture of the kinds of activities and areas of academic life that engendered a sense of competition or inequality, and from that built an image of the type of academic who represented the yardstick based on what participants perceived to be success and failure (later conceptualised as the "hegemonic academic" – see section 3). At this point I began a chapter for a collection about impostor syndrome (Wren Butler, in press) as the term had arisen in interviews a few times, which led to theorising unbelonging (see section 4). Initial drafting revealed this to be a highly generative way of understanding the unequal relationships between individuals and the hegemonic cultural ideal, thus the focus of the project was reorientated and the data was scoured again for any further content that revealed feelings or examples of exclusion, outsiderhood, marginality, difference, discomfort, being out of place (or their opposites). This was

158 mapped onto what encounters engendered these feelings (from activities as significant and structural as
159 applying for promotion to subtle and personal microaggressions like being consistently addressed by first
160 name in an email where everyone else is "Dr" (P16)), and these constitute the "legibility zones" that comprise
161 the trunk of this article (see section 5).

162 **3. The Hegemonic Academic**

163 The concept of "hegemonic masculinity" was first introduced by Raewyn Connell and has become one of the
164 major understandings of the perpetuation of masculine dominance. Representing the version of malehood
165 that is ascendant in any given time and place, it does not necessarily entail a "normal" way of being a man in
166 that it may only be exhibited by a minority, but is the archetype against which masculinity is defined and
167 through which it maintains its power (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Similarly, the hegemonic academic is
168 a theoretical construct describing the most valorised way of being an academic; like hegemonic masculinity it
169 can refer to physical characteristics and/or behaviours, practices, and values. I would also argue there is some
170 overlap between the toxic excesses of hegemonic masculinity and the hegemonic academic (Nunn, 2016) and
171 that ideal academic identity is correlated with maleness (Danvers, 2018). However, whereas gender identity
172 is constituted by modes of being that have no original template and thus shift significantly over time and
173 context, academic ideals are rendered more concretely and universally by international (or at least Global
174 North) discourses of "excellence" (Pressland & Thwaites, 2017).

175 The hegemonic academic is an archetype that cannot be entirely fulfilled. That said, those who carry the most
176 privilege receive dividends for having automatic rights to participation in HE, and therefore have a more secure
177 position from which to withstand any feeling of exteriority. Whilst the sense of not 'measuring up' (P5) may
178 be common ground, participants were acutely aware that some academics objectively stand taller than others
179 and to greater or lesser extents indulged the fantasy that they would feel safer if they hit or exceeded more
180 metric targets. It is on account of these nuances that I move away from binary concepts such as
181 inclusion/exclusion or static theories such as impostor syndrome.

182 **4. Unbelonging**

183 Although some participants did refer to impostor syndrome or fears that 'they're going to find me out' (P8;
184 P11) most indicators of feeling out of place were less conscious. The problem with attributing these sensations
185 to a syndrome is that it pathologises an experience that in context is quite rational (Churchill, 2018). Audit
186 culture; managerialism; institutional and sectoral assessments of quality, performance, and productivity:
187 these things create an environment where participation is reliant on earning a place and where the necessary
188 achievements could always be more or better, either objectively or in comparison to others. Furthermore, it
189 locates the issue in the individual, whereas I would argue that any space dominated by competitiveness is
190 fundamentally hostile—especially one where failures are more frequent than successes, losses more than
191 wins, and rejections more than acceptances. Finally, impostor syndrome is essentialised into an affliction one
192 "has" or does not (much like diversity), whereas participants perambulated through degrees of impostorhood
193 depending on situation, company, career stage, and so on (Anthias, 2018).

194 I characterise this vacillating relationship as unbelonging in the hope it captures, to a greater or lesser extent,
195 everyone. The most frequent alternatives such as "outsider" or "marginal" not only suggest a location that is
196 always anterior to a perceived centre, linguistically reinscribing the very notion of a consistent "inside" (as
197 opposed to a site of continual contestation), but evoke certain populations and identities (those most readily

198 labelled "diverse" or "other"). Whilst this research suggests that the most under-represented in HE are most
199 severely disadvantaged by the often systemic layering and linking of sites of unbelonging, it also illuminates
200 some of the tensions and contradictions that often get lost in discussions of objective marginalisation. Not all
201 marginalities are visible or attributable to systemic axes of oppression, and focusing only on these exclusions
202 can overlook the effects of *feelings* of outsiderhood—not just in terms of the individual but how this feeling
203 informs their actions. This also obscures the commonality of human vulnerability (Rogers, 2016), greater
204 attention to which could arguably offset the very neoliberal individualism that opens the door to feelings of
205 unbelonging.

206 Given the increasing collective awareness and rightful fury around historical and institutional hoardings of
207 power, as evidenced by recent headline-grabbing activism such as #MeToo, #TimesUp, Black Lives Matter,
208 etc., one could be forgiven for wondering why we should care about the feelings of "everyone" in a context
209 still dominated by white middle-class men. This is a reasonable concern, but I propose there are several
210 reasons to attend to even the most structurally privileged. First, if an environment is uncomfortable even for
211 those it is built around, it can only be worse for those it is not. Second, feelings motivate behaviour and the
212 sense of being under threat can be used to rationalise instrumental and individualistic practices that further
213 disenfranchise minorities. Third, without privileging the comfort of dominant groups above marginal ones, we
214 may nonetheless wish for an environment that is not uncomfortable for anyone. Fourth, as evidenced perhaps
215 by defences such as #NotAllMen, people often do not self-identify as *personally* powerful even when they are
216 in cultural ascendancy and wield systemic power; furthermore, anyone in a position of authority (including
217 minority identities (Rogers, 2016)) can act in concert with or as an agent of hegemony. Therefore, fifth, it is
218 important to understand how the structural apparatus of HE affects all of its constituents in order to shift
219 responsibility away from individuals and groups and look instead at the framework that allows them to
220 perpetuate hegemonic inequalities. If the system continues to be built on the same values and reward the
221 same kinds of work it will not be possible to create a more meaningfully inclusive HE because there are too
222 many for whom the demands are unreachable. We must go further than simply enabling a more diverse set
223 of people to exploit themselves (and others) in the service of an academic career, and that means looking at
224 the ways the current operation makes an outsider of everyone.

225 Unbelonging, in my definition, is not antithetical to belonging or a position of inherent deficit but the
226 experience of disconnection, dislocation, disjunction between the self and one or more aspects of the
227 immediate or wider environment: it can be transient and contextual. "Alienation" would perhaps be a suitable
228 synonym, but there are already a variety of conceptualisations for this term, not least Marx's definition (which
229 I also employ to refer to a disconnection from the self arising from over-complicity with the environment,
230 similar to Ball's (2012) 'ontological insecurity'). Conversely, unbelonging is a term I have not seen substantially
231 theorised in relation to academia; there is a significant body of work on topics related to belonging and its
232 opposites, especially for minority communities, but I propose here that unbelonging is a concept worth
233 considering in its own right (i.e. not as the negative of belonging). Beyond HE research (mostly in the study of
234 migrant, marginalised, and diaspora communities) there is limited reference to unbelonging; however, it is not
235 given its own definition and used in relation primarily to place, race, and nation (e.g. Christensen, 2009; Lidola,
236 2011; Pettersson, 2013). Interestingly, other frameworks for (un)belonging are also tripart (Christensen, 2009;
237 Yuval-Davis, 2006) and to some degree overlap with the legibility zones described here; however, much of the
238 scholarship that orientates to belonging first and unbelonging as the absence of it focuses on "us and them"
239 narratives that I do not find readily applicable to this project. The individualistic nature of HE experienced by

participants makes the dynamic more "me and them" in this context: there is no "us", and the "them" is almost entirely mythical.

By way of example, unbelonging consists in achieving the markers of inclusion (e.g. making Professor) yet feeling out of place (e.g. the only woman in the room); feeling at home in one context (member of a supportive research group) but insecure in the wider environment (serial article rejections); having all the accolades on paper (shortlisted for every permanent job) yet not being granted admittance (stuck on short-term contracts). That it is a feeling is important: the same stimulus will not engender identical sensations in everyone, and it is not necessarily observable externally—indeed, unbelonging can be produced by the disparity between others' judgements and our inner sense. Crucially, despite being uncomfortable unbelonging does not have to be negative and is not an aberration of a default state (i.e there is no inner circle from which we have been "cast out" or denied entrance, only positions of varying proximity we occupy in relation to each other and the imagined centre). One function of this paper is to demonstrate, by organising sites of unbelonging identified through the interview data into three layers, that despite the illusory nature of inclusion the intersections and overlaps of circumstances and social identities for some compound this to degrees that take exclusion from being a feeling to a fact.

5. Legibility Zones

Whether consciously or not, most participants made comparisons—between themselves and their colleagues, and against their idea of the hegemonic academic. Building a composite of this ideal suggested that the array of things both macro and micro that can engender or represent unbelonging are divisible into three layered categories: institutional, ideological, and embodied.

I call these layers "legibility zones" because to be perceived as harmonising with the ideal, participants in HE must be intelligible in relation to the hegemonic academic. The act of comparison, as with any process of interpretation, is underpinned by the "reader's" assumptions and prejudices and based on the partial information available to them. This creates the possibility of mismatch between how study participants saw themselves and how they were regarded by others, and partially explains why the experience of unbelonging is so mutable and pervasive. Often unconsciously, participants had an image of what a "real" academic looked like, endowed through the wider academic environment and the increasingly narrow criteria for success, and read others (and themselves) through that lens. But with these spectacles only certain characteristics are legible and others become blurry or invisible, so the more aligned an identity (of a person or a methodology, discipline, institution, etc.) appears to be to these ways of being, the more intelligible they are as "legitimate" (Gagnon, 2018). It should also be noted that whilst the legibility zones are not arranged hierarchically and overlay each other, they are not always visible simultaneously in that intelligibility in one zone can occlude visibility in another (e.g. the 'very quiet' precarity (P15) experienced by many senior and thus "secure" academics), and struggles may cluster in particular areas.

5.1 Legibility Zone 1: The Institutional (LZ1)

"Everyone hates admin". This was certainly a view shared by participants in this project, who almost universally declared 'pointless' administrative and bureaucratic tasks their least favourite aspect of the job. However, as well as being a necessary part of getting things done, administrative processes are the method by which human beings become institutionally legible. What for one is a mindless and unnecessary bureaucratisation of a previously undocumented activity is for another the means through which their

relationship to an institution is formalised. Even if only as a line on a spreadsheet, to be translated into an audit trail is to be inscribed within the institutional machinery, to appear within record systems and on lists: as far as the apparatus of the organisation is concerned, to exist.

Perhaps the most fundamental way inclusion is endowed is through institutional affiliation. Being a member of an organisation provides a certain level of resource, infrastructure, and security. It also conveys endorsement that renders academics more intelligible to subsequent employers (analogous to the validation from white colleagues Arday (2018) observes is required by academics of colour). P11 muses, 'I wonder if it's a sort of self-perpetuating cycle, like you go to an interview and you've already got an affiliation, you're more likely to get the job.' However, being recognisable as an employee is not only a signifier of successfully achieving the academic competencies required to be deemed "employable" but a legitimisation of the identity "academic" both internally and externally (as Cribb & Gewirtz (2013) highlight, the merits of academics are often spoken of in terms deriving from institutional reputational drivers). The particular prestige associated with traditional Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, Reader, or Professor titles is a powerful ideal to which most participants who had not achieved it aspired. This is not helped by the idea that this type of contract is the norm; as P13 told me, 'my role before I left, it was teaching, research, and admin as everybody's is'. But this so-called "standard" academic contract is not the only way of *doing* an academic job, and not the deal 'everybody' gets, even if it is frequently seen as the only way of *being* an academic. For example, P2 held a hallowed indefinite post, but as a Teaching Fellow and on a fractional basis, describing it as 'not the holy grail of, you know, 100% full-time 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'.

These fundamental means of recognisability as an academic are underpinned by a raft of subtler indicators that are often related to contractual matters. P6 reported that 'if 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', whilst another fractional academic, P7, noted the importance of physical space: '[o]nce I got there more and was permanently at the university, obviously I became more of an integrated member of staff […] And I did have my own office and my own desk, and that made a huge difference'. Likewise, having a role that makes sense in the local context is significant; P16 was a researcher in their first post-doctoral position at a teaching-focused university without a substantial research culture, who said:

> 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.

For those already on the fringes of academic culture by virtue of not holding a 'holy grail' position or through being new, lack of integration is only compounded by unsupportive institutional processes that prevent staff becoming intelligible in institutional systems and languages, identifiable in a physical location (or through affiliative digital credentials), or understood as someone people 'know what to do with'.

Sub-roles are also important for more established academic staff, where the administrative responsibilities assigned indicate what "type" people are and what future opportunities are available to them. P13 observes,

> you can see it happening that some people are being tailored toward promotion and so they get the good roles, they get the things that will count. And things that don't count, like

319 programme leadership or year guidance tutor or whatever, […] people that get given those
320 or are asked to do those, you know where you fit already.

321 Successfully applying for promotion or passing probation are also sites of bureaucratic belonging, as are
322 numerous other exercises that rubber-stamp success and often create in-groups as a by-product. A significant
323 driver of this is the Research Excellence Framework (REF: a nationwide audit of research quality occurring
324 every 7-8 years, most recently in 2021), which deserves its own article for the multifarious negative effects it
325 catalyses, just one of which is in determining who is considered "research-active" (a categorisation that I have
326 witnessed result in contract massaging—e.g. moving staff onto teaching-only contracts—to ensure "activity"
327 matches up with perceived quality). These processes are highly emotive: 'I wasn't included in the REF last time-
328 I was furious. I really felt excluded from the group' (P28). Other markers of institutionally-defined excellence
329 include winning competitive research grants or internal resources (space, time, money), working at an
330 institution performing well in the university league tables, publishing in "top" journals, positive module
331 evaluations, and so on. There are virtually endless methods by which an identity allied to the hegemonic
332 academic is conferred or denied by bureaucratic processes that render individuals readable on paper, all
333 surrounded by 'rigidly policed rituals' (Nunn, 2016, p. 10), many of which, like peer review, entail colleagues
334 acting as gatekeepers for each other (a topic for another article given its central function in academic life and
335 clear significance in relation to unbelonging).

336 So, administrative apparatuses can confer validation, but they can also hinder it. Not being recognised as an
337 insider, by people or by systems, can communicate a sense of 'I don't deserve to be here' (P11), and precarity
338 is a creeping issue throughout the academy regardless of employment status. P15, a Professor-level academic
339 who had already been made redundant once and was facing down a second scare, was blunt on this matter:
340 'a permanent job is not a permanent job'. Anxiety around security was prevalent across the spectrum, often
341 manifesting in a perceived necessity to hyperproduce to meet institutional targets, beef up on-paper
342 achievements, and outstrip peers (Ball, 2012). However, this willingness to work excessive hours and exhibit
343 dedication to the *doing* (research in particular) was also seen as constitutive of the hegemonic academic in a
344 more ephemeral sense: as an indicator of *being*.

345 *5.2 Legibility Zone 2: The Ideological (LZ2)*

346 As outlined in LZ1, legitimacy is partly about concrete indicators of validation and administrative legibility. In
347 LZ3 I will show how embodied modes of being also affect recognisability, and to what degree unbelonging is
348 based simply on being physically anomalous (cf. Ahmed (2012) on 'becoming a stranger'). However, I would
349 argue that it is not raw physicality that causes misrecognition but the assumptions about what that identity
350 represents and how far it resembles hegemonic conceptions of what an academic "is" and who HE is therefore
351 "for".

352 The "isness" of academic identity is not bound to the body, although it derives from it. Lived experience affects
353 both how a particular version of academicness came to be hegemonic and how possible it is to resemble it
354 (i.e. because white middle-class men established the academy white middle-class men are arguably most
355 adapted to and accepted by its demands (Leonard, 2001)), but isness lies in the nuance between doing and
356 being. All participants were academically employed, but the nebulous anxiety about being a 'proper academic'
357 (P6) was almost universal, highlighting how manifest indicators of authenticity operate as proxies to quell a
358 deeper unsettlement. The fantasy that achieving the validations of LZ1 would engender a sense of arrival was

debunked by securely-employed senior staff who continued to carry a sense of not 'measuring up' (P5) (in contrast to Keefer's (2015) findings).

The most notable belief apparent throughout participants' testimony, even if they did not frame it in such terms, was that a true academic is someone for whom it is involuntary. It is a vocation, an integral aspect of self-identity, a matter not just of what they do but who they are. This was demonstrated most powerfully by P8, who volunteered for the project precisely because 'although I'm a white heterosexual male, I actually I think represent the kind of academic who's always under-represented'. He continues,

> academia to me is a job. So to me I do it as a profession. It's not a vocation, it's not my passion. None of those things ring any bells with me. I work 9 to 5, Monday to Friday and […] I often think those kind of academics are invisible.

It is important to note here that working hours are part of what identifies this participant as an outlier, showing an intrinsic link between the concept of vocation and the active demonstration of it through overwork. As P18 says, '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'. However, P16 observes how self-perpetuating and toxic this expectation can be (Mountz et al., 2015), and how early in the academic training it is enculturated:

> [on Twitter] there's all these memes about being a PhD student and about how you have no life […]. [W]hen 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.

Furthermore, not everyone is equally able to meet these standards even if they want to. Working evenings and weekends, or even working 9-5 in a lab (Deem, 2003), is not an option for those with multiple demands on their time and energy (cf. Bathmaker et al.'s (2013) parallel findings with differently privileged students). This is perhaps the biggest barrier to true inclusivity as it is also the grounds on which inclusion can be resisted (the claim to inclusion is undermined by the perceived insufficient commitment), and declining to demonstrate the required vocational zeal through hyperproductivity is also an impediment to collecting the career-building tokens described in LZ1. Thus those who continue to perform hegemonic academic identity in this way inevitably accrue more denotations of success, perpetuating the ideal.

Outwith working practices, there are many other ideological positions that were revealed to underpin ideal academic identity, a couple of which I shall briefly touch on, as well as epistemological and ontological norms peculiar to local cultures (e.g. disciplines, departments, etc.). HE, especially in the social sciences, has been criticised for its (perceived) left-wing bias (Adam Smith Institute, 2017). This perspective was shared by P18, a proud Conservative who nonetheless elided public mention of this when job-seeking for fear of not being seen as 'part of the club', and it is in these realms that significant tensions become apparent. The hegemonic academic is ideologically liberal *but* many of the behaviours participants saw as reflective of the ideal (individualism, instrumentalism, ambition) are underpinned by neoliberal conservatively-aligned values. This produces an unresolvable conflict where meeting one set of demands requires moving away from a second; shoring up one identity (the "proper academic") necessitates betrayal of another (the "leftie"). A similar dichotomy is evident in the fact that many participants experienced their personal nadir precisely when they were most outwardly successful, undergoing the kind of alienation (or estrangement) theorised by Marx,

399 where workers' sense of humanity is eroded by their lack of autonomy under capitalism. This was articulated
400 most strikingly by P5, who after winning multiple grants was granted a promotion they consequently felt
401 'conflicted' about and 'got really really sick […] kind of suicidal […] I didn't feel like a human being. I didn't feel
402 like a person any more, I felt like a task list'. The sense of uncomfortable complicity (Rogers, 2016) and
403 'unhomeliness' (Manathunga, 2007) engendered by being professionally rewarded for acts that were
404 physically damaging and philosophically discordant is something I do not have space to elaborate here, but
405 was a significant point of inner conflict for most participants, especially senior academics who had to enact
406 neoliberal processes on others.

407 One of the strongest beliefs among participants was in the virtue of education for its own sake, lamenting the
408 intrusion of 'grubby' (P8) neoliberal fiscal concerns. Interestingly, even P18's conservative commitment to the
409 free market was cowed by this: 'that kind of mindset doesn't really suit higher education […] [universities]
410 should be seen as a place of just learning and knowing as opposed to just how you make your money'.
411 However, as P22 notes, there is a false dichotomy here and its roots are beholden to traditional conceptions
412 of what and who HE is for:

> 413 there's all sorts of weird class stuff. So I have no problem with someone coming to university
> 414 to get their paper to get a job and earn money and have nice holidays. That's absolutely fine.
> 415 But there is a sense like, 'oh that's not what it's for, it's for the enrichment of the mind'. But
> 416 like it can be for the mind and someone's life as well.

417 Perhaps more pertinently, academics themselves struggle to balance their base needs with their academic
418 endeavours too: 'it's true isn't it that academics are worried about their pensions and […] we're worried about
419 our pay, we're worried about our terms and conditions? So it's not just, you know, pure intellectual ether for
420 us either' (P22). There is a sense, though, that to be concerned about material circumstances is a betrayal of
421 true academic pursuit, emblematic of a lack of vocationality. Displaying this zeal is such a powerful ideal that
422 some consider it borderline immoral to occupy an academic post without it: 'I once had an anonymous email
423 off someone who said I was a cockroach and that I should quit so that somebody with passion could take my
424 job' (P8). This illustrates how some ideas about what being an academic is intersect with assumptions about
425 who academia is for, and as P22 highlights these notions are deeply rooted in historical biases. Much like the
426 capacity to overwork, the freedom to travail regardless of recompense, or even to be single-minded about
427 one's job, does not require the same level of sacrifice from everyone. This conception also plays into the
428 fantasy of academia as a 'community of scholars' rather than 'a site of exclusion, elitism and power' (Harris,
429 2005, p. 424).

430 *5.3 Legibility Zone 3: The Embodied (LZ3)*

431 The greater representation of white, socioeconomically stable men in HE was spontaneously acknowledged
432 by most participants, including those who fell into this group, but was felt more acutely by those who did not.
433 At the most basic level, LZ3 encompasses this type of unbelonging (see also Wren Butler (in press)), extending
434 to all the ways corporeal existence has bearing not only on gaining the status markers of LZ1 and sharing the
435 ideological perspectives of LZ2, but on the extent to which people are assumed to (even if they do not), or to
436 which these positions are legible when inhabited.

437 I use the term embodied here relatively loosely, to denote characteristics that (are perceived to) connect
438 individuals to a wider group (e.g. race, gender, class), those that relate to physical circumstances (e.g. location,

parent or carer status, condition of health), or aspects of corporeality that may be malleable and take on significance as indicators of covert identity features (e.g. clothing, voice, attractiveness). Thus some aspects of identity considered here are either invisible or to a degree optional. These attributes may be inferred (correctly or not) from proxy indicators or known only to the individual, and it is important to consider the complexities of this. Whilst being misrecognised can potentially pay dividends in terms of receiving the privilege associated with a higher status identity, the converse can also be true, and either way the internal experience of being illegible creates an intractable sense of unbelonging (Gagnon, 2018). Passing as a member of a group with which one does not identify can facilitate feelings of fraudulence and impostorhood, and accusations of misrepresentation can equally be levelled when attempting to align with an identity that perhaps feels more authentic but is not validated externally. There are not only competitions for success, but competitions for hardship; in an environment where totems of achievement are in such short supply there is an incentive to have one’s struggles legitimised (Friedman et al., 2021). Misrecognition cuts both ways: someone with a hidden disability or illness, for example, may not receive the upfront discrimination that a more visibly impeded individual might, but may therefore have to work harder to gain the necessary accommodations. As well as placing an undue burden this also reduces the time and energy available to achieve other markers of success. As P3 points out, ‘I could do so much. Except I can’t because I’m not well enough. And I have an ill daughter’. In this way, embodied experience gives rise to unbelonging even for those who are not read as “diverse” or seen as having/being a “problem” (Leonard, 2001).

Whilst career breaks from maternity or sick leave and part-time work can be accounted for, hiring, promotion, probation, and funding panels are largely interested in concrete achievements: how many papers, how much grant income, how many positive teaching evaluations (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2013)? This can work in the favour of some, outweighing other factors, as P22 acknowledges:

> [my book is] what got me the job really because I had a definite REF entry, whereas the other people who were much cleverer and, you know, from better universities than me, didn’t have that. […] [T]he REF is a sort of actual marker of what you’ve actually done.

However, some people are more equipped to make themselves competitive in this way. Those without caring responsibilities, financial difficulties, health issues, job insecurity, and so on, who have more time and energy to devote to academic work (whether paid or not) are more likely to have a full CV. This was noted by P18, who admitted ‘I wouldn’t have got the lectureship after, you know, PhD plus three [years as a postdoctoral researcher] if I hadn’t written the amount of papers I did, because I was working sort of six or seven days’. Similarly, P10 observes that ‘the females that I do see at the higher levels in academia are ones who either don’t have families or […] they have a very supportive husband […] who actually does the care-giving’ (cf. Clegg & Rowland’s (2010) ‘care-commanders’ in HE and Burford et al. (2020) on gendered care at conferences). Thus these types of liberties are distributed unequally, with some demographics disproportionately negatively impacted by physical circumstance.

However, without wishing to downplay the very real significance of systemic inequalities, this paper is concerned primarily with the ways the impetus to emulate the hegemonic academic is exclusive on a micro level. Most participants cited resilience as one of the main qualities required of a successful academic, attributing this to the high level of rejection academic life entails. However, my analysis would suggest these rejections hold power because they are felt to corroborate subtler insecurities that underpin the endemic sense of unbelonging engendered by small daily interactions. Embodied identity is important because it to a large extent dictates the built-in resilience an individual has: the stakes are simply much higher for those in

481 unstable and precarious positions, and psychological resilience cannot be untethered from material
482 circumstances. Nonetheless, for those whose situation in life endows them with an automatic advantage, the
483 sense of insecurity and threat, which was experienced by all participants at times, is equally subjectively “real”.
484 This becomes increasingly important when considering how academics behave to each other and
485 communicate their ideal identity to others, how the necessary performance of the hegemonic academic is
486 conducted, and how the three legibility zones are drawn on in different contexts.

487 The matter of self-promotion and performance culture (Ahmed, 2012) in relation to these zones is outside the
488 scope of this article, as is a detailed discussion of the individual and collective consequences of academia being
489 organised in this competitive way, but these are central concerns of the wider project. The framework offered
490 here provides a way of thinking about the complexities of inclusion and exclusion, and the reason I address
491 embodied characteristics last is precisely because it is here that complexities most readily vanish. It is easy to
492 look at identity-based statistics and decide the solution to low participation or disparities in attainment is to
493 target particular demographics and balance the numbers. But the problems are further back: instead of
494 socialising under-represented groups into HE culture and attempting to level the playing field by endowing
495 them with the capital required to compete, perhaps we need to change the rules of the game. Rather than
496 moulding individuals to fit academia, perhaps academia should morph to fit its people (Parker, 2007).

497 **6. Conclusions**

498 In this paper I have proposed that there are several problems with popular discourses and lay understandings
499 of diversity and inclusion in HE. Namely, that they suggest a) that exclusion is an issue only for the “diverse”,
500 b) that increased diversity leads to greater inclusion, c) that inclusion is achieved by “being there”, and d) that
501 there is something stable in which to be included that only some are excluded from. I have instead offered the
502 concept of unbelonging, drawing on empirical data to posit that (even if only transiently) experiences of
503 exclusion and alienation are universal in English academia. This, I have argued, is both because the
504 environment is inherently exclusionary due to its hierarchical competitive basis and because the ideal that
505 participants in academia are required to emulate—the hegemonic academic—is unachievable.

506 To demonstrate the variety, complexity, and interaction of modes through which unbelonging is engendered
507 I have introduced a framework that categorises the features of the hegemonic academic into three legibility
508 zones. This has shown through illustrative examples that exclusion operates intersectionally and in layers at
509 administrative, ideological, and embodied levels. The conclusion drawn from this is that without attention to
510 all the ways unbelonging is invoked and the multifarious means by which people are shut out the myth that
511 academia is an environment in which it is possible to belong perpetuates, as does the belief that experiencing
512 unbelonging in itself confirms impostor status. Consequently, energy is wasted by individuals chasing a feeling
513 of security that will never arrive and by institutions focusing efforts on enculturating a wider set of identities
514 into its toxic machinery (Leonard, 2001). I follow Wibben’s (2012) thinking (albeit applied to a different field)
515 that instead of futile bids for safety we must embrace that ‘we are always already insecure, that there is no
516 escape from our fundamental condition of vulnerability’ (p. 593).

517 Perhaps HE is kinder to some people, or perhaps they are merely more protected from the consequences of
518 academic competitiveness, and this inequality of course should be addressed. But not at the expense of
519 recognising that providing more armour to the most vulnerable does nothing to change the brutality of the
520 environment and continues to exclude those who do not wish to enter into battle (de Groot, 1997).
521 Furthermore, as Jason Arday (2018) notes, the presence of marginalised identities in academia ‘powerfully

522 threatens and disrupts normativity by challenging elitist binaries' (p. 3) so until those binaries are dismantled
523 there is no way for these subjectivities to participate without being treated as disruptive simply for existing.
524 The rub is, academia's 'hierarchical, martial, and patriarchal values' (Mountz et al., 2015, p. 1254) also reflect
525 and structure culture more broadly, and 'because higher education is such a core component in the
526 reproduction of élite power in contemporary capitalism, a truly democratic alternative can only be imagined
527 starting from an alternative conception of society as a whole' (Radice, 2013, p. 416). If this is the case, assuming
528 the overthrow of patriarchal capitalism is not imminent, what can we hope to achieve that amounts to more
529 than rearranging the deckchairs on the sinking Titanic? Firstly, it is important to recognise that even superficial
530 (and well-intentioned) changes can have unforeseen negative consequences if not carefully considered. So
531 whilst issues of inequality do require urgent attention, "quick wins" are worthy of suspicion; correcting an
532 imbalance in one legibility zone can easily disrupt balance in another and a central takeaway of this framework
533 should be to think holistically about sites and modes of unbelonging. A second recommendation would be to
534 ensure there is meaningful consultation on any proposed change and that concerns raised are properly
535 engaged with, including attention to the emotional impact of change (especially for those, like academics,
536 whose work is (ideally) strongly aligned with their wider identity). Being included in decision-making processes
537 is in itself a powerful counter to feelings of unbelonging and allows "invisible" illegibilities to surface; indeed,
538 study participants were particularly critical of 'lip service' consultations that wasted their time by ignoring
539 their input, experiencing also a gradual but corrosive repeal of significance, autonomy, and agency as a
540 consequence of being "done to". If there is one set of academic practices I could deal a death blow to, based
541 on the joint data of participant interviews, the theoretical framework offered here, and my own experience in
542 this particular area, the Hydra that is research funding would be first on the chopping block. The many
543 tentacles of the REF, which inveigle their way into every legibility zone and area of academic life, are in my
544 view the biggest single accelerators of inequalities in UK HE and, along with the excessive machinery around
545 competitive funding bids, use vast amounts of human and institutional resource, creating fervent anxiety in
546 academic and professional services personnel alike. Full discussion of this is for another paper, but if we cannot
547 entirely remove the competitive basis of HE as a whole, eliminating it as far as possible from research
548 funding—so that research-responsible academics do not have to fight for the resources required to fulfil their
549 roles—would be an excellent start.

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558 The author declares no conflict of interests.

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