Article

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

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

1. Introduction

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

This article is more concerned with issues of exclusion, but I alight briefly on the institutional language of "D&I" as I believe it frames how exclusion is thought of and who is considered excluded (and thus what the

remedies may be). That exclusion happens at all can only be inferred from the fact inclusion initiatives are required in the first place, and I suggest that to those who engage only casually (or reluctantly) with these imperatives, the discursive grouping of diversity with inclusion risks conflating the two. In this coupling, only those with marginalised protected characteristics are at risk of exclusion, and there is perhaps a tendency to assume too that one inevitably follows from the other—that diverse identities being present equates to their inclusion. We might also question, as Sara Ahmed (2007, 2012) does, what these words really mean, who they adhere to, and what they hide, especially as they circulate beyond D&I units and into common parlance. That these buzzwords become part of the institutional lexicon does not necessarily mean they are paid more than lip-service, and as Ahmed (2007) points out, the fatigue with their repetition is emblematic of the failure to make such

vocabulary redundant. As a final note, diversity and inclusion as enacted is substantially one-way: It is incumbent on the "diverse" to adapt in order to be more includable (Anthias, 2018) rather than on the institution to reflect the heterogeneity of its constituents by doing things in more diverse ways (Parker, 2007).

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

I begin with a brief overview of the article's underpinning research project and methods (Section 2) before moving to outline two central concepts derived from its data: the imagined ideal of the "hegemonic academic" (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 article'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; Tight, 2010). The underlying data was generated through in-person semi-structured interviews of 60 to 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 (competition and masculinity, at that time) 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 (Section 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 (for a similar approach see Ahmed, 2012). 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 (no issues have been raised so far).

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., for women see Hoskins, 2010; Rogers, 2016; for fixed-term staff see Loveday, 2017, 2018; for gender and women's studies see Pereira, 2017; for early-career academics see Pressland & Thwaites, 2017; for manager-academics see Deem, 2003; for disability see Brown & Leigh, 2020; for race see 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, for example, "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 mapped onto what encounters engendered these feelings, from activities as significant and structural as applying for promotion to subtle and personal microaggressions like being consistently addressed by first name in an email where everyone else is "Dr" (P16). These constitute the "legibility zones" that comprise the trunk of this article (see Section 5).

3. The Hegemonic Academic

The concept of "hegemonic masculinity" was first introduced by Raewyn Connell and has become one of the major understandings of the perpetuation of masculine dominance. Representing the version of malehood that is ascendant in any given time and place, it does not necessarily entail a "normal" way of being a man in that it may only be exhibited by a minority, but is the archetype against which masculinity is defined and through which it maintains its power (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Similarly, the hegemonic academic is a theoretical construct describing the most valorised way of being an academic; like hegemonic masculinity it can refer to physical characteristics and/or behaviours, practices, and values. I would also argue there is some overlap between the toxic excesses of hegemonic masculinity and the hegemonic academic (Nunn, 2016) and that ideal academic identity is correlated with maleness (Danvers,

2018). However, whereas gender identity is constituted by modes of being that have no original template and thus shift significantly over time and context, academic ideals are rendered more concretely and universally by international (or at least Global North) discourses of "excellence" (Pressland & Thwaites, 2017).

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

4. Unbelonging

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

I characterise this vacillating relationship as unbelonging in the hope it captures, to a greater or lesser extent, everyone. The most frequent alternatives such as "outsider" or "marginal" not only suggest a location that is always anterior to a perceived centre, linguistically reinscribing the very notion of a consistent "inside" (as opposed to a site of continual contestation), but evoke certain populations and identities (those most readily labelled "diverse" or "other"). Whilst this research suggests that the most under-represented in HE are most severely disadvantaged by the often systemic layering and linking of sites of unbelonging, it also illuminates some of the tensions and contradictions that often get lost in discussions of objective marginalisation. Not all marginalities are visible or attributable

to systemic axes of oppression, and focusing only on these exclusions can overlook the effects of *feelings* of outsiderhood—not just in terms of the individual but how this feeling informs their actions. This also obscures the commonality of human vulnerability (Rogers, 2016), greater attention to which could arguably offset the very neoliberal individualism that opens the door to feelings of unbelonging.

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

Unbelonging, in my definition, is not antithetical to belonging or a position of inherent deficit but the experience of disconnection, dislocation, disjunction between the self and one or more aspects of the immediate or wider environment: it can be transient and contextual. "Alienation" would perhaps be a suitable synonym, but there are already a variety of conceptualisations for this term, not least Marx's definition, which I also employ to refer to a disconnection from the self-arising from over-complicity with the environment, similar to Ball's (2012) 'ontological insecurity.' Conversely, unbelonging is a term I have not seen substantially theorised in relation to academia; there is a significant body of work

on topics related to belonging and its opposites, especially for minority communities, but I propose here that unbelonging is a concept worth considering in its own right (i.e., not as the negative of belonging). Beyond HE research (mostly in the study of migrant, marginalised, and diaspora communities) there is limited reference to unbelonging; however, it is not given its own definition and used in relation primarily to place, race, and nation (e.g., Christensen, 2009; Lidola, 2011; Pettersson, 2013). Interestingly, other frameworks for (un)belonging are also tripart (Christensen, 2009; Yuval-Davis, 2006) and to some degree overlap with the legibility zones described here; however, much of the scholarship that orientates to belonging first and unbelonging as the absence of it focuses on "us and them" 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 article 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….It was always criticised in meetings and things like that,' whilst another fractional academic, P7, noted the importance of physical space: 'Once 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 programme leadership or year guidance tutor or whatever…people that get given

those or are asked to do those, you know where you fit already.

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

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

5.2. Legibility Zone 2: The Ideological (LZ2)

As outlined in LZ1, legitimacy is partly about concrete indicators of validation and administrative legibility. In LZ3 I will show how embodied modes of being also affect recognisability, and to what degree unbelonging is based simply on being physically anomalous (see also Ahmed, 2012, on 'becoming a stranger'). However, I would argue that it is not raw physicality that causes

misrecognition but the assumptions about what that identity represents and how far it resembles hegemonic conceptions of what an academic "is" and who HE is therefore "for."

The "isness" of academic identity is not bound to the body, although it derives from it. Lived experience affects both how a particular version of academicness came to be hegemonic and how possible it is to resemble it (i.e., because white middle-class men established the academy white middle-class men are arguably most adapted to and accepted by its demands; see Leonard, 2001), but isness lies in the nuance between doing and being. All participants were academically employed, but the nebulous anxiety about being a 'proper academic' (P6) was almost universal, highlighting how manifest indicators of authenticity operate as proxies to quell a 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) (contrasting with Keefer's findings on doctoral transitions; see Keefer, 2015).

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 think I 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….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.

Furthermore, not everyone is equally able to meet these standards even if they want to. Working evenings and weekends, or even working 9 to 5 in a lab (Deem, 2003), is not an option for those with multiple demands on their time and energy (cf. Bathmaker et al. (2013) for 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). 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 (Carl, 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, where workers' sense of humanity is eroded by their lack of autonomy under capitalism. This was articulated most strikingly by P5, who after winning multiple grants was granted a promotion they consequently felt 'conflicted' about and 'got really, really sick…kind of suicidal….I didn't feel like a human being. I didn't feel like a person any more, I felt like a task list.' The sense of uncomfortable complicity (Rogers, 2016) and 'unhomeliness' (Manathunga, 2007) engendered by being professionally rewarded for acts that were physically damaging and philosophically discordant is something I do not have space to elaborate here but was a significant point of inner conflict for most participants, especially senior academics who had to enact neoliberal processes on others.

One of the strongest beliefs among participants was in the virtue of education for its own sake, lamenting the intrusion of 'grubby' (P8) neoliberal fiscal concerns. Interestingly, even P18's conservative commitment to the free market was cowed by this: 'That kind of mindset doesn't really suit higher education….[Universities]

should be seen as a place of just learning and knowing as opposed to just how you make your money.' However, as P22 notes, there is a false dichotomy here and its roots are beholden to traditional conceptions of what and who HE is for:

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

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

5.3. Legibility Zone 3: The Embodied (LZ3)

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

I use the term embodied here relatively loosely, to denote characteristics that (are perceived to) connect 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 signifi-

cance 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.…The 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 post-doctoral 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. the concept of 'care-commanders' in HE in Clegg & Rowland, 2010; see also 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 article 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 unstable and precarious positions, and psychological resilience cannot be untethered from material circumstances. Nonetheless, for those whose situation in life endows them with an automatic advantage, the sense of insecurity and threat, which was experienced by all participants at times, is equally subjectively "real." This becomes increasingly important when considering how academics behave to each other and communicate their ideal identity to others, how the necessary performance of the hegemonic academic is conducted, and how the three legibility zones are drawn on in different contexts.

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

6. Conclusions

In this article I have proposed that there are several problems with popular discourses and lay understandings of diversity and inclusion in HE. Namely, that they suggest (1) that exclusion is an issue only for the "diverse," (2) that increased diversity leads to greater inclusion, (3) that inclusion is achieved by "being there," and (4) that there is something stable in which to be included that only some are excluded from. I have instead offered the concept of unbelonging, drawing on empirical data to posit that (even if only transiently) experiences of exclusion and alienation are universal in English academia. This, I have argued, is both because the environment is inherently exclusionary due to its hierarchical competitive basis and because the ideal that participants in academia are required to emulate—the hegemonic academic—is unachievable.

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

Perhaps HE is kinder to some people, or perhaps they are merely more protected from the consequences of academic competitiveness, and this inequality of course should be addressed. But not at the expense of recognising that providing more armour to the most vulnerable does nothing to change the brutality of the environment and continues to exclude those who do not wish to enter into battle (de Groot, 1997). Furthermore, as Arday (2018, p. 3) notes, the presence of marginalised identities in academia 'powerfully threatens and disrupts normativity by challenging elitist binaries' so until those binaries are dismantled there is no way for these subjectivities to participate without being treated as disruptive simply for existing. The rub is, academia's 'hierarchical, martial, and patriarchal values' (Mountz et al., 2015, p. 1254) also reflect and structure culture more broadly, and 'because higher education is such a core component in the reproduction of élite power in contemporary capitalism, a truly democratic alternative can only be imagined starting from an alternative conception of society as a whole' (Radice, 2013, p. 416). If this is the case, assuming the overthrow of patriarchal capitalism is not imminent, what can we hope to achieve that amounts to more than rearranging the deckchairs

on the sinking Titanic? Firstly, it is important to recognise that even superficial (and well-intentioned) changes can have unforeseen negative consequences if not carefully considered. So whilst issues of inequality do require urgent attention, "quick wins" are worthy of suspicion; correcting an imbalance in one legibility zone can easily disrupt balance in another and a central takeaway of this framework should be to think holistically about sites and modes of unbelonging. A second recommendation would be to ensure there is meaningful consultation on any proposed change and that concerns raised are properly engaged with, including attention to the emotional impact of change (especially for those, like academics, whose work is (ideally) strongly aligned with their wider identity). Being included in decision-making processes is in itself a powerful counter to feelings of unbelonging and allows "invisible" illegibilities to surface; indeed, study participants were particularly critical of 'lip service' consultations that wasted their time by ignoring their input, experiencing also a gradual but corrosive repeal of significance, autonomy, and agency as a consequence of being "done to." If there is one set of academic practices I could deal a death blow to, based on the joint data of participant interviews, the theoretical framework offered here, and my own experience in this particular area, the Hydra that is research funding would be first on the chopping block. The many tentacles of the REF, which inveigle their way into every legibility zone and area of academic life, are in my view the biggest single accelerators of inequalities in UK HE and, along with the excessive machinery around competitive funding bids, use vast amounts of human and institutional resource, creating fervent anxiety in academic and professional services personnel alike. Full discussion of this is for another article, but if we cannot entirely remove the competitive basis of HE as a whole, eliminating it as far as possible from research funding—so that research-responsible academics do not have to fight for the resources required to fulfil their roles—would be an excellent start.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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