Impostors or interlopers? Intersectionality and belonging in mid-career academia

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Impostors or interlopers? Intersectionality and belonging in mid-career academia

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Abstract

This developmental paper explores the sense of belonging amongst a frequently overlooked group in higher education, the mid-career academics. The 'leaky pipeline' in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) academia is a widely accepted phenomenon affecting women and minorities and whilst much of the efforts to date focus on the bottom-up approach by increased recruitment of future STEM academics, this project seeks to focus on the often-forgotten middle part of the pipeline. In an effort to transform academia for the better and to remove any societal, organisational and personal barriers continuously experienced by students and staff, it is essential that all groups receive an equal amount of attention. Therefore, this research seeks to fill the gap in understanding of lived experiences of mid-career STEM academics. This qualitative study sets out to understand how the intersectional self-identification of participants impacts their experiences of (non)belonging in UK higher education. Following the initial stages, the project intends to explore the raised issues in more depth, as well as to expand its reach to include participants from across more UK universities. This will be done to evaluate their experiences of the identified themes and to gauge their proposed solutions. In the long term, the research seeks to develop a blueprint for sustainable solutions towards improving the work environment of academic colleagues employed at post-92 institutions.

Keywords: *belonging; impostor; interloper, intersectionality; mid-career academics*

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1. Introduction

The "interloper syndrome" and "impostor syndrome" are related psychological phenomena that affect individuals in academic and professional settings. While both syndromes involve feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt, they differ in their conceptualisation and focus. The impostor syndrome is characterised by chronic feelings of self-doubt and fear of being discovered as an intellectual fraud (Villwock et al., 2016). It is described as a psychological pattern characterised by doubts about one's capabilities or achievements despite evident success (Huecker et al., 2023). Individuals experiencing impostor syndrome often feel undeserving of their accomplishments and attribute their success to luck or external factors rather than their abilities.

On the other hand, the interloper syndrome, as discussed by Bagilhole (2013), refers to a feeling of not fully belonging or fitting into a particular group or environment, particularly within the academic community. It is characterised by a sense of being an outsider and not fully integrating into the academic environment. Bagilhole's work emphasises the influence of gender and class on the experience of the interloper syndrome, highlighting the importance of understanding the intersectionality of this phenomenon.

While both syndromes share similarities in terms of feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt, impostor syndrome is largely internal. Interloping, on the other hand, is relational, where one is made to feel like an intruder and the feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy are caused by the actions of others. This project explores whether the length of service has impacted the feelings of belonging; and whether those employed in UK academia for 8-16 years still experience impostor and/or interloper syndromes.

2. Literature review

When it comes to exploring belonging and inclusion in academia majority of research is geared towards understanding student experiences and even when employing staff participation, it is often utilised only to view student experiences from another angle (Blake et al., 2022).

Mid-career academics are a crucial segment of academia, facing unique challenges and opportunities which require tailored support, mentorship, and professional development initiatives to ensure their continued success and contribution to academia (Anuik, 2021). Yet existing research tends to focus on early-career and late-career faculty, overlooking mid-career academics (Ward and Wolf-Wendel, 2016).

Research has shown that impostor syndrome is associated with anxiety, low self-esteem, lack of confidence, and a labile self-concept (Maqsood et al., 2018). It can also impact career advancement, as it is a predictor of psychological distress and can hinder professional growth (Ruple, 2020). In the case of academic physicians, impostor syndrome has been linked to lower confidence in problem-solving skills and higher intolerance of uncertainty (Lin et al., 2022).

From an intersectional perspective, impostor syndrome can be more prevalent among women, younger individuals, and certain minority groups (Søgaard et al., 2021; Barnard et al., 2021).

Nicholls et al. (2022) advocate for changes to academic practice and to the extant concept of what a successful researcher should look like, in order to improve the well-being of academics in the workplace. They highlight the paucity of literature in the area of understanding the experiences and support needed by more senior researchers which this research seeks to fill.

3. Motivation of the research

3.1 Research aim

This study aims to understand whether mid-career STEM academics employed at post-92 institutions in the UK HE experience belonging in academia and to what extent does their intersectional identity affect their sense of belonging.

3.2 Implications for Research, Practice and Society

In order to address the persistent inequalities as well as the gender and ethnicity 'leaky pipeline' in STEM academia, it is vital to continuously explore the impact of contemporary factors on the workforce, ensuring that all, not only the most junior staff get considered when amending institutional cultures, policies and practices. This way any emergent inequalities can be attended to proactively.

4. Methodology

The definition of mid-career academia in this study was based on the length of academic service rather than academic achievements, current job role or other quantifiable outputs. According to majority of funding grants an academic cease to be eligible for an early career research grants 5-8 years after completing their PhD. Regarding 8 years post-doctorate as the starting point of mid-career academia and adding the same amount of time for the duration of mid-career stage, the mid-career academics were for the purpose of this study defined as those who have completed their doctorates 8 to 16 years prior.

This qualitative case study (Rowley, 2002) was conducted with the use of 33 semi-structured interviews which were conducted across 3 UK universities. The case study approach was selected to allow a thorough investigation of a complex phenomenon involving multiple variables (Yin, 2018). Participants were recruited via non-probability purposive sampling (Vehovar, et al., 2016) to ensure a varied population. The data were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The collected data was analysed according to Creswell's (2013) five-step process outlined in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Creswell's data analysis process described in "Guide for Qualitative Data Analysis"

Additionally, the experiences of participants were considered using an emic intersectional lens (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012). Emic intersectionality utilises an emergent approach to understanding. When using this approach researcher lets the strands of privilege and oppression emerge naturally without purposely exploring pre-determined strands of diversity.

5. Preliminary findings

The experiences of participants were considered with the use of an emic intersectional lens (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012). Emic intersectionality allows researchers to explore how individuals navigate multiple identities and how these identities intersect and interact with organisational structures and culture. In contrast, etic intersectionality looks at how broader societal structures such as racism, sexism, and heteronormativity shape individuals' experiences and opportunities.

33 participants were recruited from 3 post-92 institutions. Breakdown of participants can be seen in the Table 1.

Table 1: Profile of the study participants

Total participants N=33	Institution 1 N1=15	Institution 2 N2=10	Institution 3 N3=8
	Female N=14	Male N=19	
	BAME N=17	White N=16	

In keeping with the emic approach, interviewees were invited to define their own intersectional identities allowing them to cover categories they felt best described them and affected their day-to-day lives in academia. As a part of this intersectional self-identification, some participants highlighted their caring responsibilities, age, religion, disabilities, and/or class. What was however interesting when discussing participants' sense of belonging in academia was the individualised perception of belonging and the variety of experiences across a wide variety of participants. Based on the extant literature it would be expected that women and minorities have the lowest sense of belonging (Śliwa et al., 2022). It was therefore interesting to observe that the lived experiences of mid-career academics are vastly different.

Belonging

A third of the interviewees reported positive experiences in terms of a sense of belonging in academia. This included staff whose intersectional identities would expectedly place them into positions of double or triple jeopardy (Sang & Calvard, 2019).

"I've worked in a number of different areas and in every place I found a sense of belonging." (Senior lecturer, 8 years employed in academia)

The other two-thirds of participants reported feelings of non-belonging either on occasion or continuously.

Interloping

Migrant and BAME women experienced the feelings of interloping most frequently. However, men of different ethnicities and religions commented that it was mainly doctorates and other academic qualifications from non-UK HEIs that made them feel like interlopers in their academic communities.

"If I was educated in the UK. If I went to university in the UK or at least if I had my PhD from the UK, I think I would have a much easier career much much quicker." (Reader, 13 years employed in academia)

Impostor syndrome

What was interesting when discussing belonging in academia was the observation that even members of what is often considered the most privileged group, the cis-white heterosexual non-disabled British men aged 31-45, (Hanappi-Egger & Ortlieb, 2016) with undeniable academic and research achievement are prone to experiencing impostor syndrome.

"I have impostor syndrome. I'm often a little bit confused about where I am. About how I made it into this particular field; and how did I get promoted through different levels to this position." (Associate professor, 10 years employed in academia)

6. Conclusions

When it comes to belonging, there seems to be no easy rule to predict whether an individual academic would feel included in their institution, field or department. However, it appears that the majority of mid-career academics employed at post-92 institutions continue experiencing impostor and interloper syndromes throughout their careers. This project challenges assumptions that after being a part of a field, institution or department for a long time one automatically feels belonging. It has also further highlighted the importance of interrogating the perspectives of mid-career academics and considering their perceptions and experiences particularly with the use of an intersectional lens when making changes to policies and practices in academia.

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