All Imposters in the University? Striking (Out) Claims on Academic Twitter

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Abstract

This article extends feminist debates on academic labour and particularly career categories, exploring how ambivalent insider/outsider academic 'imposter' positions are performed and circulated on social media. We argue for a conceptual shift from imposter syndrome to imposter *positionality* via an empirical focus on how the UK 2018 Universities and Colleges Union industrial action played out on academic Twitter. We develop autoethnographic fictions as method, exploring the ethical dilemmas of doing feminist research online. Industrial action was fractured by categorical career stages; however, contested career categories are also mobilised by academics to claim an outsider-on-the-inside imposter position, which *implies* well-documented academic exclusions according to class, race, and gender while simultaneously glossing over and conflating such inequalities with, for instance, 'early career' status. Our argument is against the depoliticization of both imposter 'syndrome' and career stage categories, and rejects any search for the avowedly authentic academic imposter. Instead we attend to how imposter positionality is claimed and circulated online, across the career course, questioning the notion that we are 'all imposters' in the academy.

Keywords

Academic Twitter, career categories, higher education, imposter syndrome, imposter positionality, industrial action

Introduction

Feeling like an imposter is anecdotally ubiquitous in higher education (HE) and typically involves sensations of inadequacy and fears of being 'found out'. 'Imposter syndrome' refers to convictions that one's entrance into, and successes within, academia have been awarded by mistake or achieved through a convincing, deceptive performance. This article emerges from the tensions in understanding academic imposter syndrome from a feminist perspective, in the context of intersecting educational inequalities and outsider-on-the-inside epistemological stances. Popular discourse posits imposter syndrome in HE as extremely common:

> 'Impostor syndrome is rampant throughout academia. Many of the most respected academics in the world wake up every morning convinced that they are not worthy of their position, that they are faking it, and that they will soon be found out.' (McMillan 2016)

Everyday discourse also articulates academic imposter syndrome as an individualized, apolitical problem to be overcome. A common piece of advice for early career academics is to listen to more experienced, senior academics sharing feelings of inadequacy:

> '…as a professor, you can make a surprising difference just by opening up about your own academic insecurities… Knowing that professors feel like fakers from time to time, too, might help the rest of us feel a little less self-conscious—and a little more like we belong.' (Bahn 2014)

Such advice circulates online and is put into practice particularly on academic Twitter. However, these well-meaning suggestions gloss over how feelings of inadequacy and convictions of fakery carry different meanings depending on how academics are positioned across early-mid-established career stages. Such advice simultaneously mobilizes and downplays the hierarchies embedded in academic career courses (Breeze & Taylor 2018).

Understanding imposter syndrome as an individual issue also glosses over well-documented educational inequalities, and the ways that class, race, and gender structure access to and progression within academic careers, and construct academic competence and authority according to middle class, white, and masculine norms (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al. 2012; Gabriel & Tate 2017). Academic imposter *syndrome*

resonates with – yet rarely explicitly names – these structural inequalities. Likewise academic imposter syndrome speaks to long-standing feminist arguments for the epistemological and political importance of the gendered, classed, and racialized 'outsider within' as a generative location for knowledge production (Collins 1986). In this article we expand the debate on academic imposter syndrome, or imposter phenomena (Clance & Imes 1978), by making a conceptual shift to imposter *positionality*, which we define as a claimed outsider-on-the-inside academic location, and explore how it articulates with career categories on academic Twitter.

'Opening up', as Bahn (2014) and others advise, is now a thoroughly online and digitally mediated phenomena, and includes academics sharing their successes and failures via online social networks. 'Academic Twitter' is a key site for such sharing and is a forum where academic careers, professional identities, and scholarly communities are performed and reproduced, as 'creating an online presence or brand has become almost as important as building a robust CV' (singh 2015: 272). Centrally for our empirical focus, academics' Twitter use can be understood as potentially disruptive *and* inscriptive of entrenched academic hierarchies (Costa 2018).

In what follows we firstly review feminist analyses of HE inequalities and current understandings of academic Twitter, which is an exemplary location for our feminist analysis of imposter positionality. We then discuss our autoethnographic fiction methods, which allow us to explore the methodological and ethical dilemmas of doing feminist research online. Empirically we focus on an ongoing case on academic Twitter: the 2018 Universities and Colleges Union (UCU) industrial action over changes to Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) pensions. We demonstrate how this case is fractured by academic career categories and hierarchies, and argue that imposter positionality and claims to insider/outsider academic locations circulate in ways which mobilise the entitlements of the career course. Building on earlier feminist contributions, we think through how imposter positionality is *done*, rather than simply celebrating marginality, and argue against de-politicised understandings of imposter syndrome *and* career categories. This involves a feminist sociological sensibility, prioritising the social dynamics of claiming and performing an outsider-on-the-inside position on academic 'strike Twitter', in which experiences of imposterism are present and mobilised although not explicitly named.

Literature review: Imposters in history and online

Here we situate imposter positionality in relation to firstly, feminist analyses of educational inequalities, including as re-emergent in contemporary neoliberal HE and secondly, in relation to research on academic Twitter and the performance of academic subjectivities on this platform. Throughout we attend to career stages and justify our case selection; the 2018 UCU Strike.

We see the importance of situating imposter positionality in context rather than imagining imposter 'syndrome' as universally reflecting contemporary HE. Historical arrivals and entrances of those excluded from HE institutions, or 'space invaders' (Puwar 2004), are found in list-like online articles, naming 'the first women at university' (Carter 2018) and 'the first black students admitted to 15 prestigious U.S. universities' (Siddiqui 2013). Looking to the history of educational exclusions and entrances however brings the risk of locating these dynamics exclusively in the past, as old problems now transcended. This is clearly not the case, as contemporary 'firsts' abound , particularly in relation to promotion and progression up the career 'ladder'. In the UK women comprise only 24% of professors despite occupying 45% of academic jobs (Equality Challenge Unit 2017). Black women are starkly underrepresented, and Rollock's (2019) report counts just 25 Black women professors in the UK (see Mirza 2017; Bhopal 2016). Women and especially Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) women are disproportionately absent from senior appointments, are paid less and have a higher likelihood of being employed on casual contracts (Equality Challenge Unit 2017). As these exclusions and inequalities persist, they are accompanied by the institutional commodification of 'diversity' (Ahmed 2009) and post-feminist declarations that position feminist concerns in the past, no longer relevant as problems already solved and critiques already incorporated (McRobbie 2008, Rivers 2017).

Given this context, it is no surprise that academics marked as 'other' and as 'embodying diversity' (Ahmed 2009), might feel like, and be treated as, imposters in the academy. Johnson & Joseph-Salisbury (2018) show how racist microaggressions, including being asked directly 'are you supposed to be here?' perpetuate white supremacy in HE, against those racialised as 'out of place' (Mirza 2018). Loveday (2016) explores how working class students and academics are placed as embodying 'deficiency' and Reay and colleagues have documented working class students'

negotiations of 'fitting in' and 'standing out' (Reay et al. 2010). Taylor (2013) has shown how diversity can be 'sticky' attaching itself to those marked as visibly 'other' according to class and sexuality, and how 'being diverse' in academia can be personally painful.

In this context, feeling like an imposter can involve less of a fear of being found out and more 'a case of *already having been found out'* (Lumsden 2019: 116 italics original); recognised as an imposter in the traditionally masculine, middle class, white world of the university. This is compounded by social and institutional dismissal of women of colour as 'unknowing' and 'less credible' (Gutierrez y Muhs et al. 2012), while feminist scholarship itself is denigrated 'as not quite "proper" academic knowledge' (Pereira 2016: 101). Further, feminist academics are dismissed as "imposter[s] in a university dedicated to the neutral, balanced pursuit of disinterested scholarship" (Boxer 1998: 161, cited in Pereira 2016: 101).

Contemporary HE inequalities cannot be understood in terms of wholesale exclusion, and we must attend to complicated entrances, inclusions, and successes, including 'celebrations' of the arrival of academic 'outsiders'. Women's academic presences are inflated and exaggerated, for example, in photographs of always-smiling white women 'leading the UK's top universities' (The Guardian 2015, in Breeze & Taylor 2018). These larger-than-life presences reduce as much as they inflate and 'reconstruct the serious intellectual subject as a masculine one' (Leathwood 2013: 133) working to retire feminist analyses as redundant and no longer necessary. Likewise news articles announcing Professor Olivette Otele as the first Black woman history professor in the UK (BBC 2018), articulate a *promoted* academic subject, ascending the career course, while re-promoting an individual success story. Professor Otele's promotion was the subject of substantive activity on academic Twitter, drawing attention to the sexist racisms of HE and Twitter as a medium where academic arrivals and progressions are debated and done, underscoring academic Twitter as a primarily location for investigating imposter positionality.

Attending to these dynamics is a repetitive task, as feminist scholars draw attention again to: the stratified and stratifying character of HE; the classed, racialised, and gendered construction of recognisable academic authority; and the epistemological possibilities of 'outsider' positionality. *Class Matters* (Mahony & Zmroczek 1997), recently celebrated its 20th anniversary, and the collection speaks to imposter

positionality, mirrored in edited collections such as: *Working Class Women in the Academy* (Tokarczyk & Fay 1993) *Presumed Incompetent* (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al. 2012) and *Inside the Ivory Tower* (Gabriel & Tate 2017). Just as gender and race pay gaps and barriers to promotion are repeatedly evidenced and rediscovered anew, feminist academics can find themselves repeatedly naming, for instance, working-classness, queerness, racialisation, and claiming an ambivalent outsider-on-the-inside academic imposter positionality.

Imposter feelings of fraudulence and failure likewise persist, alongside analyses of academic labour from ambivalent outsider/inside feminist locations (Thwaites & Pressland, 2017; Taylor & Lahad, 2018), as academic work and academic identities are re-constituted in relation to 'neoliberal', 'entrepreneurial', 'performative' universities (Taylor 2014; Breeze et al. 2019; Pereira 2016). Precarious employment, including zero hours contracts, structures insider/outsider positions in the academy. Likewise academic entrance and especially 'arrival' are stretched, and can be felt as permanently deferred, generating a sense of never quite belonging or succeeding *enough*, never quite getting there. Insecure short-term employment contracts proliferate in the 'early career', but are also endemic across the career course, and securing a permanent, open-ended position is far from guaranteed. The 'hamster wheel of precarity' can be a long-term condition, and not one that is limited to 'junior' academics (Courtois & O'Keefe 2015: 56). Gill and Donaghue (2016: 93) remind us that an exclusive focus on the problems faced by early career academics risks ignoring wider 'toxic and increasingly unstable work relations' that manifest across the career course as a whole. Our conceptual shift from imposter 'syndrome' to *positionality* signals an attentiveness to ongoing inequalities, exclusions, marginalisations and career hierarchies in HE. Our analysis interrupts popular, individualising and universalising understandings of imposter 'syndrome' and contributes to re-thinking feeling like an imposter as a public feeling (Breeze 2018) via exploring how claims to an outsider/inside position are made and performed online.

Online, networked, digital technologies are bound up with the shifting character of academic careers (Costa 2018), increasingly academics are encouraged and expected by employers to use online social media and/or social networks for professional purposes (Jordan 2019). Twitter specifically is a platform where academic reputations

and career opportunities circulate (singh 2017); 'issues of career trajectory and future employment are plainly present' for academics on Twitter (Gregory & singh 2018: 181). Lupton's large-scale study of over 700 academics found that 90% of participants used Twitter for professional purposes (2014: 14), demonstrating the importance of the platform to contemporary academic life. Jordan (2019: np) found that academics who use social networking sites are 'subject to different pressures and priorities' depending on their career stage location. In Jordan's (2019: np) study ResearchGate and Academia.edu were found to 'favour existing hierarchies'. By contrast, academic Twitter is often conceptualised as a platform where academic stratification is challenged – due to the 'distributed, networked nature of communications on Twitter' (Stewart 2016: 81) *and* reinscribed (Gregory & signh 2018; Costa 2018; Budge et al. 2016), highlighting contestation over academic belonging and making Twitter an exemplary location for investigating imposter positionality.

On academic Twitter, Hearn's definition of the branded self as 'an entity that works and, at the same time, points to itself working' (2010: 427) resonates strongly. For academics on Twitter, expressing personal experience and emotion, alongside sharing professional accomplishments, have become 'exploitable and desirable' resources for employers (Hearn 2010: 422) in the online academic reputation economy (Gregory & singh 2018). The tensions and slippage (Stewart 2016) academics encounter in performing overlapping personal and professional identities on Twitter again indicate the fruitfulness of exploring imposter positionality in this context. Likewise, institutional 'public engagement' Twitter accounts are de rigueur and bound up with funding imperatives for research 'impact', and digitally engaged academics are promoted as 'an empirical measure of a university's reputational currency' (McMillan Cottom 2015: np).

However, Gregory & singh (2018: 176-180) argue that academics' use of Twitter cannot be understood only in terms of self-branding and self-promotion, but involves community, solidarity and organising, including 'crowd-sourced career counselling', and raising 'awareness of academic labour issues across academic hierarchies'. The multifaceted character of academic Twitter, as a space of both entrepreneurial self-promotion *and* of potential politicization, makes it an exemplary empirical location for investigating how claims to imposter positionality circulate. Academics on Twitter

can be understood as performing 'messy' and 'multiple' identities (Budge et al. 2016) as they encounter 'tensions between revealing and concealing', and negotiate their own perceived in/authenticity in balancing 'the desire to maintain positive impressions with the need to seem true or authentic' (Marwick & boyd 2010: 124). Veletsianos & Stewart (2016) have traced how academics make considered 'selective [and] intentional' challenging disclosures about personal and professional issues online. Twitter as a site of online persona management, where users encounter a further 'tension between networked and institutional audiences' (Stewart 2016: 77) is another reason why it makes such an appropriate location for investigating imposter positionality.

Academics 'reinvent' themselves online, and mobilise digital practices to seek recognition via peer validation online 'against the system of formal legitimation, that is, the institution' (Costa 2018: 360); 'challenging norms of academic ways of being' (Budge et al. 2016: 210) and 'circumventing institutional constraints' (Jordan 2019: np). Costa (2018) conceptualises digital scholars as engaged in a struggle over how academic work is constituted and recognised. This is a struggle only too familiar to feminist scholars, even more so when we recognise how Twitter encourages users to 'traverse from private to public… from the personal to the political, or from the individual to the collective, and back' (Papacharissi 2012: 191). But we can see how 'the risks and rewards' of digital public scholarship 'are not the same for all academics' according to 'racist and sexist norms of who should be expert' (McMillan Cottom 2015: np); as Stewart notes, 'network platforms are increasingly recognised as sites of rampant misogyny, racism, and harassment' (2016: 62), and building an online academic presence is conditioned by the politics of class, race and gender.

On Twitter, just as in feminist scholarship, academics negotiate tensions between: criticising and struggling to transform institutionalised forms of academic hierarchy (including career stage categories) *and* performing and reproducing those same hierarchies; professional self-presentation *and* personal/political engagement; self-promotional reputation management *and* community solidarity; performing academic belonging and authority *and* identifying and sharing experiences of discriminatory institutional structures *and* claiming an ambivalent outsider-on-the-inside position. In this context, academic Twitter is an evidently appropriate location for our analysis of imposter positionalities; how claims to an ambivalent outsider/inside academic

location are made, and circulated online, with a particular focus on academic career categories. In doing so we join those attending to the everyday phenomena of Twitter in general (Brownlie & Shaw 2019; Marwick & boyd 2010; Murthy 2012; Puschmann et al. 2014) and academic Twitter specifically (Budge et al. 2016; Gregory & singh 2018; Veletsianos 2012) not via 'big data' or quantitative methodologies, but by attending to small scale interactions with a qualitative sociological and feminist sensibility.

Methods

Background. Our autoethnographic fiction methods mobilise our experiences as a source of empirical material, and developed from a 2018 British Sociological Association event that we organised at the University of Strathclyde, on 'Imposter Syndrome as a Public Feeling in Higher Education'. During the presentations, we were struck by the seeming ubiquity of feeling like an imposter, as participants articulated how *everyone feels like* this and *we're all imposters* while simultaneously reiterating the well established 'inequality regimes' (Acker 2006) of HE. Given the evident self-identification with an imposter position, including on academic Twitter as participants Tweeted about the event, it became necessary for us to question how an imposter position is articulated and claimed, hence the event provided the inspiration for our methods and impetus for this paper.

Case selection. In order to investigate how imposter positionality is *done* in everyday interactions on academic Twitter, we selected an ongoing case; the 2018 UCU industrial action over USS pensions. While the 2018 strike is not *explicitly* orientated to imposter 'syndrome', we propose that it is precisely this characteristic which makes it an appropriate and compelling location for investigating imposter *positionality* and performances of claimed insider/outsider academic positions. The 2018 strike threw questions of academic hierarchy and belonging into sharp relief, and we conceptualise discourses surrounding the UCU action as about, in part, claims to insider/outsider academic locations and, centrally for our analysis, as a heightened moment when imposter positionalities were articulated alongside and via academic career categories.

With UCU members having voted in favour of action over proposed USS pension changes, strike action began on 22 February 2018 against 64 universities, represented

by Universities UK (UUK), and escalated, alongside action short of a strike, over fourteen strike days. This industrial action represents a moment when some of the fault-lines of contemporary UK HE were exposed, including conflict and solidarity across the career course, which is of central significance for this paper. The strike saw insecurely employed and 'early career' academics with little or no accumulated USS pension striking alongside established academics with decades of pension contributions. Likewise commentators pointed out how pensions are an equalities issue, as the effects of gender and race-based pay gaps, and barriers to promotion, accumulate over an academic career. Attending to 'strike Twitter' over this period allows a unique exploration of how claimed imposter positionalities are articulated and circulated across career stages and categories, at a heightened moment of conflict and dispute.

Imposing methods. In looking to our own engagements with academic Twitter as a source of empirical material we join digital sociologists 'moving beyond easy distinctions between "online" and "offline"' and attending to 'the deeply entangled relationships between technology, media, bodies, and data' (Orton-Johnson et al. 2015 np). As Hines (2017: 11) notes, 'online dynamics often heighten tensions that are then debated off-line.' Our methods thus involved generating empirical material based on our participation in 'strike Twitter' and a broader online/offline collection of experiences during the ongoing pensions dispute. Doing feminist research *on* Twitter brings a set of ethical dilemmas, cohering around issues of consent and the *assumedly* public and *seemingly* ephemeral character of Twitter. Stewart identifies a 'dissonance between orality-based expectations of sociality and print-based interpretations of speech' (2016: 82) as for instance Tweets can be striped of context and 'catapulted to the attention of institutional decision makers' (ibid 81) 62). Despite their seemingly temporary status, Gregory & singh emphasise how 'tweets and words written online are far from fleeting. They can be searched, gathered, and used' (2018: 186). The ethical risk here is taking tweets, as presumedly public writing which in practice can be intended as more personal or private by their authors, out of context; assuming that because Twitter's terms of service ascribe a *technically* public status to Tweets that researchers need seek no further consent for their use (Williams et al. 2017).

In rejecting such assumptions and to mitigate the ethical risks associated with context collapse in Twitter research, we follow calls for reflexive and situated feminist digital

methods (Leurs 2017), and develop autoethnographic fictions as an appropriate and innovative method for working with small scale Twitter data. We adopt fabrication as an ethical practice (Markham 2012) to write autoethnographic fictions based on our own engagements with strike Twitter during the UCU industrial action including by composing fabricated tweets (see Brownlie & Shaw 2019). We draw on precedents in sociological fiction for writing fiction as a mode of inquiry in itself (Leavy 2013; Watson 2016) 'telling takes to speak embodied truth' (Inckle 2010: 27) and develop our previous work using (fictionalized) autoethnographic narratives to theorize imposter syndrome in HE (Breeze 2018) and the emotional landscapes of HE inequalities (Taylor 2013).

Feminist research has long prioritized experiential ways of knowing, for instance in 'standpoint' debates (Harding 1997; Hartstock 1997; Smith 1997), and Black feminist thought (Collins 1986), and has demonstrated the validity of autobiographical experience as empirical material (Stanley 1993). Autoethnographic methods include a range of techniques involving researchers 'retrospectively and selectively' (Ellis et al. 2010) describing, reflecting upon, and analysing their own experiences, that arise by virtue of belonging to a culture, social group, or occupying a particular social location and/or identity. There is much precedent in feminist research for using autoethnographic methods to research HE inequalities and feminist researchers have drawn on their experiences to explore belonging in HE 'on the threshold of legitimacy' (Gannon et al. 2018: 261) as well as career categories (Breeze & Taylor 2018) and 'the relational complexities of academic work' (Gannon et al. 2015, 190). In writing collaboratively, we 'collage our individual stories' (Brooks et al. 2017: 2) as we fictionalise them, and in doing so unsettle expectations for the *authentic* telling of individual stories, for 'transparent' data or 'pure truth' (Gannon et al. 2015).

In practice, deploying autoethnographic fiction saw us following key hashtags over the three week strike period in February and March 2018: #UCU #USS #UCUstrike #USSstrike #nocapitulation #WeAreTheUniversity. Six months later, in September and October 2018, we revisited these hashtags with systematic searches, using the Tweets we encountered and remembered as inspiration to write collaboratively and iteratively about our own strike participation, including our engagements with strike Twitter. We made notes based on our own experiences, including Tweets we composed but never posted, hesitating over the challenge of the 280-character limits.

Passing our notes and initial drafts back and forth over a period of three months we interwove and edited our writing to compose a fictionalised account of our strike Twitter engagement.

Circulating academic selves. Our autoethnographic fiction methods grew from our own situated and shifting insider/outsider academic locations. In turning to our experiences as a source of data and *writing ourselves in* we are wary of re-circulating only our own selves, and re-centring individual mobile subject-hoods. Adkins (2002) criticises the misplaced use of introspective reflexivity as failing to consider uneven – classed, gendered –expectations of reflexivity . Situating ourselves in relation to our empirical case however contributes to our substantive project, and allows us to attend to how 'online spaces are not removed from everyday politics, but rather deeply entangled and forged by them' (Gregory & singh 2018: 188).

We both took part in the UCU strike action and action short of a strike, withdrawing labour and joining pickets outside our building and marches around our university and city centre as embodied presences, feeling the cold and feeling the tensions as the strike action progressed, and colleagues joined, left, and crossed pickets. We felt too the expectations, enjoyments, and anxieties of strike Twitter, which became a major source of information and scholarship on the dispute, including from key figures (e.g. Jo Grady, Josephine Cumbo, Felicity Callard) and collectives (e.g. USS Briefs) as well as from official UCU and USS accounts. We tweeted and re-tweeted about the dispute, including while on the picket, sharing information, humour, and solidarity online; photographs of placards, marches, songs and dances including sometimes our own academic selfies (Lipton 2018). Being on strike and on Twitter involved being at our workplace, not quite inside and not entirely outside either, in the in between space of the university.

> *So impressed by my ECR colleagues on the picket and marching, you know who you are! #ucustrikes @UCUScotland*
>
> *First weekend this year not working and away from emails, I could get used to this.*

Our strike tweets orientate towards and re-articulate the career course, just as they perform 'good' academic subjectivities; supporting ECR colleagues and normally diligently (over-)working on weekends. We tweeted and re-tweeted as we stood, chatted, chanted, and stomped to warm our feet outside our building, while the

university's social media guidelines arrived in our inboxes greeted by automatic out-of-office striking replies. Such embodied and emplaced inside/outside entanglements inform our autoethnographic fiction methods, and allow a negotiation of the ethical dilemmas of doing feminist research (partially) online.

Data & Discussion: Imposters on strike and online

The 2018 UCU industrial action was fractured by career stage in the very substance of the dispute; over real terms reductions in the value of USS pensions. Pensions are bound up with the future-oriented academic subjectivities of 'the' career course; investing and accumulating deferred pay for a promised, although slowly cancelled (Berardi 2011; Fisher 2013) secure future. This same striving and future-invested cruelly optimistic (Berlant 2011) logic characterises casualised employment practices across HE, often understood to particularly effect 'early career' academics although manifest across the career course. During the strike imposter positionality and career stages emerged as connected and competing issues.

Strike day Nine. On the picket from 8am, outside our familiar building, wondering if we are 'allowed' inside to use the bathroom, a colleague from another union brings hot drinks for all. Wrapped in layers, balancing placards with home baking passed around. Deans and Vice Deans come into work, we're not sure if they see us, recognise us. We are 'established' and 'early career', some striking for the first time, others recalling disputes from years ago. We have developed a routine, small talk, humour and trying to make sense of the latest updates from UUK. Many are unsure if this escalating loss of wages is affordable, manageable. Advice on applying to the strike funds is passed along in the cold air, carefully a Professor suggests she won't apply, but early and mid-career colleagues should, advice echoed online:

> @seniorprof I really encourage colleagues to apply to the strike fund, it's quick and easy – this if for you early career researchers – do it now! This is why we pay our membership! #UCUstrike #USSstrike

Meanwhile 'international' colleagues' visa conditions stipulate they can't be absent for more than 10 consecutive days, there's uncertainty as to whether they can continue to strike. It's been snowing all week but despite the freezing cold someone will occasionally remove a glove, dig out a phone, and capture a photo of the whole picket together, or take a picket selfie, with smiling and frowning faces peeking out

from beneath hats and scarfs. Photos are tweeted, obligatorily re-tweeted, accompanied by a sense of joining a broader conversation, a bigger protest.

> *Cold-numb thumbs scroll through an ocean of similar tweets, feeling connected to colleagues on strike across the UK, and feeling the categorical, material distinctions across which solidarity asks us to reach:* @precariouscademic We need guidance from UCU on how early career academics can support the strike - it's risky for us, we're on the precarious edges of academia, often excluded from departmental life, solidarity can't only be for salaried, senior academics #UCUStrike #ECR

replying to @precariousacademic

> @earlycareer101 Striking to protect a pension I've never paid into and will likely never see, hope we can count on the same support from secure academics when it comes to resisting casualisation #ECR #UCUStrike

replying to @earlycareer101 @precariousacademic

> @famousprof Supporting and mentoring ECRs is one of the most rewarding aspects of #academia, for me it's a feminist commitment and a way to extend solidarity beyond the picket #academickindness

replying to @famousprof @earlycareer101 @precariousacademic

> @establishedresearcher I honestly don't know if I'd make it in the current academic climate, sometimes I think an ECR is likely much more deserving of my job, loads of solidarity and respect to all of you.

replying to @famousprof @precariousacademic @establishedresarcher

> @temporycontract I've been on contracts of <12 months for 8 years, constantly moving, delivering a massive teaching load, without the recognition OR SALARY that permanent colleagues enjoy. ECRs are the academic underclass, sidelined as much in this strike as we are at work #pissedoff

[…]

> @parttimeteachingfellow I'm home working on an overdue book chapter, wish I was picketing but today isn't one of my work days and I don't get paid for this work anyway so… hate feeling like a scab but I can't square this circle #ECR #UCUStrike

replying to @parttimeteachingfellow

> @recentPhD I feel awful but I literally can't afford to loose any more pay. And, since I do research on my own time, how can I withdraw labour that I'm not even paid for in the first place? #UCUStrike #ECR

Replying to @recentPhD @parttimeteachingfellow

> @precariousacademic Strike if you can, but not everyone can. I think secure senior faculty need to recognize this, like really recognize it and check their privileges.

Replying to @precariousacademic @parttimeteachingfellow

> @recentPhD Totally agree. I don't have a safety net of savings or family money to fall back on like some I could mention…

We hear a rumour, from another colleague at another university, a PI tweets a picket selfie and then emails postdocs reminding them their lab results are due at the end of the day. We see tweets suggesting that 'senior' and 'successful' academics go fuck themselves*, tempers are fraying, fault-lines and hypocritical investments exposedA half-heard picket conversation,* where are all the other professors? We need their presence, their clout, surely they can afford to strike? *The dispute asks us to act together for collective bargaining, withdrawing our labour positions us as* insiders-on-the-outside*, in some ways we have stepped outside of work, outside the business-as-usual hierarchy of the academy, but it is still there, and manifests in new ways. As solidarity and community are celebrated it becomes impossible to ignore the differences, and conflicts, across 'the' academic career course.*

Speaking, and tweeting, from an 'early career' location during the UCU strike mobilises another insider/outsider imposter position. Over and over again during the strike an early career position was highlighted on Twitter to diagnose a lack of reciprocal solidarity across the career course. From these perspectives the strike prioritized the concerns of more established academics, presumed secure, and their pension contributions.

Clearly hierarchies according to career stage are a built-in feature of HE, with academic work characterized by uneven trajectories, entrances, retention and movement through promotion categories and across institutions. As casualization is normalised, approaching *the* early career as a homogenously and definitionally precarious imposter position collapses and condenses the 'early career' as a blanket categorisation whereby other markers of difference, such as race, class and gender, are effaced and elided. It is necessary to question whether occupying an 'early career' location automatically produces an imposter positionality, as well as how the re-articulation of categorical career stages can constitute a claim for recognition, prioritizing arrival, progression and 'start date' over historical, structural and embodied forms of exclusion.

As we drafted this article another UCU ballot was underway, asking members to vote on whether to take action over pay, implying pay inequalities and casualization. The ballots reanimated strike Twitter activity that mobilised career categories and spoke to imposter positionality:

> @tenuredprof Really disappointed in this result, if UCU members can't support our precarious early career colleagues then we need to take a long hard look at ourselves. This was our chance to support the most marginalised in our workplace.
>
> @earlycareer101 This result tells us all we need to know about where senior academics' priorities lie. Feel sold down the river. We turned out to protect your pensions, where are you now when casualization is finally almost actually on the agenda?!
>
> @precariousacademic I'm lucky to be surrounded by mentors who give advice and share resources, showing solidarity with precarious ECRs, everyday, precarity is tough but their support gives me hope for the future #gratitude #academickindness…
>
> @hadenoughECR LISTEN, to all those 'early career' academics on prestigious fellowships sounding off about precarity, try being EC *and* a working class woman *and* at a post-92, precarity is a permanent condition for some of us! #subtweet

The relatively new, contested language of categorical career stages can be mobilised as a rather benign truth, seeming to transparently name a reality (of linear progression, of hierarchical distinction naturalised according to a temporal logic) rather than attending to how 'career categories' also re-produce the phenomena they ostensibly only describe. There are striking variations in definitions – and experiences – of career categories at play (Breeze & Taylor 2018) which can become lost if we speak only of 'the' early career, and 'the' established professor, glossing the differences which manifest within and across categories defined by, for instance, date of PhD completion. If being 'early career' is homogenously coded as an imposition, our collective attention is drawn away from enduring inequalities *within* the category. Likewise,if being 'established' is coded oppositely as automatically and unequivocally secured and privileged, this again erases class, race, gender differences between 'established' academics and negates how enduring inequalities structure the career course and academics' location within it.

Conclusion

In positioning academic imposter 'syndrome' as felt despite demonstrable belonging and evidenced successes, 'rampant' in the academy and experienced across the career course, popular discourse constructs imposter syndrome *by definition* as an internal, private problem separate from the exclusionary and stratifying character of HE. This is a double depoliticizing move, simultaneously universalizing and individualizing imposter syndrome, and bypassing the abundant empirical evidence and theoretical insights on inequalities and exclusions in HE from decades of feminist scholarship. Working in this context, we propose a conceptual shift from imposter 'syndrome' to imposter *positionality*, a claimedoutsider-on-the-inside academic location. This allowed us to argue against the de-politicisation of imposter syndrome and explore how imposter positionality is articulatedand circulated via career categories, on academic Twitter and in the particular case of the 2018 UCU pensions strike.

Feminist scholarship, including standpoint theories and especially Black and working-class feminist thought, has long been concerned with insider/outsider academic locations, both politically and epistemologically. Whether moving feminist theory 'from margin to centre' (hooks 1984), learning from the Black feminist 'outsider within' (Collins 1986), or analysing racialised and gendered 'bodies out of place' as 'space invaders' (Puwar 2004). Concurrently, feminists have attended to how 'all drawings of inside-outside boundaries in knowledge' can be 'theorized as power moves, not moves towards truth' (Haraway, 1988: 576). Building on this rich history, we suggest that articulating imposter positionality via career categories on academic Twitter is vulnerable to remaining 'locked into a profoundly individualistic framework that turns away from systemic or collective politics' (Gill & Donaghue 2016: 91), unless this kind of imposter positionality is thoroughly situated in relation to the endemic exclusions and stratifications that are foundational to HE.

In looking to academic Twitter, and our own participation in strike Twitter, as a source of empirical material, we encountered the ethical dilemmas that inhere in the contested and variously understood private/public status of Tweets. We did not want to presume or ascribe an automatically public status to the tweets we encountered on our timelines during the industrial action. Accordingly, we developed autoethnographic fictions, drawing on our own participation and writing new, fictionalised Tweets about how career categories were mobilised to claim imposter positionalities. This does not offer a perfect solution to thorny questions of privacy

and consent in researching online, but as a creative method of data collection, mode of enquiry, and strategy of data presentation, it allowed us to negotiate the public-private character of academic Twitter.

During and since the 2018 dispute over USS pensions, we saw re-articulations of career categories on academic Twitter, and strike Twitter in particular, in ways that conflated career stages with an imposter positionality. Simultaneous academic insiders (qualified, eligible, credentialed, PhDs) left or pushed outside by the labour conditions of contemporary UK HE, and academic outsiders (those without secure employment, not or not yet on the career ladder) made their voices heard within the terms of the pension dispute. Our suggestion is that the ways that such positions and claims circulate can be disconnected from the broader political economy of HE and the various and shifting insides and outsides of academia. Conflating an imposter position with *only* 'early career status' glosses over well-documented educational inequalities, and the ways that class, race, and gender (for instance) structure access to and progression within academic careers, and construct academic authority according to middle class, white, and masculine norms (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al. 2012; Rollock 2019; Morley 2011). Articulations of imposter positionality as entwined with and based on career stages implies and resonates with – yet rarely explicitly names or grapples with – these other structural inequalities and exclusions.

There is no doubt that early career academics face exploitative employment practices, however if early career status is understood exclusively in terms of antagonism and/or of smooth, linear progression to established career stages then we risk reproducing the individualising and competitive meritocratic logics of academic career stages themselves (Breeze & Taylor 2018). Our findings here caution against overly conflating 'early career' status with an imposter position without attending to enduring, intersectional educational inequalities. Career *stages* themselves are based on an assumedly linear temporal logic of progression, while a 'permanent' academic appointment can be out of reach for many, career stages presume upwardly mobile, striving academic subjects, making their way up and through promotions, ascending via categorical career distinctions. Early career is then an interesting category to mobilise around, since it allows an articulation of claims for recognition and material access, as a stage or phase on the way 'up' a promotional ladder. As definitions and experiences of being early career are stretched up to ten or fifteen years post-PhD, and

fractured according to systemic inequalities such as gender (O'Keefe & Courtois 2019), precarity governs access to academic careers. As universities reduce permanent contracts and increasingly rely on temporary and part-time staff for both research and teaching across the career course (Courtois & O'Keefe 2015) we can critically question the notions of linear 'progress' and upward mobilities embedded in career course temporalities. However we can also contrast career hierarchies with more permanently held, embodied and perceived markers of academic outsiderness that continue to be ascribed according to for instance race, class, and gender in the academy.

Career stage categories are mobilised as a short-hand for academic privilege and precarity, yet doing so risks inscribing a homogeneity within each category. Our hope is that this article serves as one contribution to the broader project of necessarily understanding career categories as entwined with, and structured by, well-documented and continually re-emerging HE inequalities and exclusions.

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