

## Chapter 4

# Intersectional Perspectives

*Keywords:* Gender; academic housekeeping; ethnicity; representation; classed and racial microaggressions; disability; precarity; reasonable adjustments; conferences

### Overview

While social class exerts a significant influence on the experiences of WCAs, a lesser examined dimension is the intersection of class with other vectors of disadvantage. Intersectionality is a theory coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) in her critique of US antidiscrimination law and social justice movements. It serves as a crucial tool for illuminating the connections between intersecting inequalities that traditional frameworks of thought often fail to adequately grasp (Crenshaw, 1989; Hill Collins, 1989). Crenshaw challenged the assumption that women are a homogeneous group and highlighted Black women's unique experiences of both racism and sexism. An autoethnographic account by Akbar (2022) supports this intersectional approach, as he noted that his biography is 'not as simple as solely identifying as coming from a working class background...it is several complex layers of the dual identities amalgamated into one' (p. 74). Jones and Maguire (2021) described how the WCA women in their study felt they were often 'positioned differently by colleagues and students' (p. 1), compared to other academics. While scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins and Valerie Hey have compellingly argued that WCA women of colour endure an 'outsider within' status, being excluded by both gendered and classed hierarchies (Hey, 2003; Hill Collins, 1986). Alongside this, scholars with disabilities from disadvantaged backgrounds described the difficulties of navigating academia (Dolmage, 2017). Chapter Four expands our analysis by exploring the experiences of WCAs when gender, ethnicity, and disability intersect with their class heritage.

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**The Intersections of a Working-Class Academic Identity: A Class Apart, 51–69**



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## Gender

According to higher education statistics agency (HESA data, females accounted for 49% of full-time staff and 66% of part-time staff working in HE during 2021/2022 – although the statistical data demonstrated that female staff members were more likely to be working as non-academic staff (63% of non-academic staff were female, compared with females representing 48% of academic staff). Women continue to be underrepresented at senior levels, holding just 30% of professor positions in the UK in 2021/2022 – although there has been an increase of two percentage points since 2020/2021 (HESA, 2023). Research by Santos and Dang Van Phu (2019) revealed that being female has a negative association with academic rank, even after controlling for many factors such as age, marital status, responsibility for household chores, field of research, whether they have children or hold a PhD or not as well as the percentage of working time spent on teaching and teaching related activities. Gender was not found to be significant when academics (male and female) had children after seniority had been secured (p. 2). There were further examples of gendered inequalities, such as female academics had a lower chance of authoring invited commentaries in medical journals compared with men with similar scientific expertise, seniority, and publication metrics (Thomas et al., 2019). Female scholars in the UK also tend to receive lower research funding compared with their male colleagues (Wijnen et al., 2021) and fewer citations, i.e. articles written by women as primary authors had approximately half the number of citations as those with men as the primary author (Chatterjee & Werner, 2021). This is significant as research impact is often gauged primarily through the number of citations a publication receives. Although this should be examined on a subject level as Borchardt et al. (2018) found that in Chemistry, the importance of a research article is only partly captured by its citation rates.

The COVID-19 pandemic heightened and exacerbated pre-existing gender disparities, resulting in the emergence of the she-cession (Profeta, 2021). The school/childcare closures meant that many parents lost access to institutional and informal childcare support which significantly impacted the paid and unpaid labour of parents, particularly of course, mothers (Yavorsky et al., 2021). Since the start of the pandemic, many women curtailed their research activities, begun fewer new projects, and acquired less research funding (Cardel et al., 2020; Gao et al., 2021, cited in Caldarulo et al., 2022). Ucar et al. (2022) estimated that the gender gap in academia suffered an approximately 12-month setback during the lockdown months of 2020, while COVID-related research areas suffered an additional 18-month setback.

When gender intersects with social class research suggests that it can have a negative influence on academic careers. For instance, Ostrove's (2003) research on American female students found that working-class women were more likely to experience imposter syndrome, although this study only compared them to females from other social classes. Alongside this, a study conducted by the British Federation of Women Graduates (2023) revealed that female academics frequently faced pressure to assume time-consuming responsibilities that their male counterparts tend to decline. Unfortunately, these tasks typically do little

to enhance female academic prospects for career advancement. For instance, a PhD study by Rachael Goodwin (2022) included a classed and gendered analysis of academic housekeeping. She found that this work was often exacerbated by ‘working class traditional feminine caring roles within the home, on top of the emotional labour conducted in HE’ (p. 135). These additional tasks left one respondent revealing that she felt like she was a ‘dogsbody’ (Goodwin, 2022, p. 136). WCA women are still encouraged to take on nurturing and service roles within the profession due to their working-class values and upbringing.

Despite Walkerdine et al. (2001) aptly asserting ‘that social class is an overwhelmingly masculine category’, it is interesting that research on the gendered impact on WCA experiences, typically focuses on female WCAs. This may stem from the assumption that male WCAs can leverage their gender to gain academic authority. However, Pease (2015) argues that WCA men can also feel like outsiders, and any masculine privileges are offset by disadvantages stemming from their working-class heritage. In Pease’s case, he argues that any advantages stemming from his masculine identity were counterbalanced by his working-class background. Hadley (2022), a ‘late onset entrant into academia’ (p. 154), adds further complexity in his poignant illustration of the emotional toll that his PhD journey took. He referred to being ‘very aware of [his] accent, not... terribly confident and although accepted, not quite fitting in’ (p. 155). These narratives are important as they provide some evidence to demonstrate that WCA men may not be entirely confident in academia, despite the perception that their masculinity eased their passage through academia. Hadley’s autoethnography contributes to the growing understanding of the nuanced ways in which WCA men navigate the academic terrain, revealing that their journeys involve a constant negotiation of identity within the academic realm. Incidentally, it is interesting that in the chapter abstract,<sup>1</sup> Hadley (2022) refers to himself as being a ‘bateleur’ (i.e. a tightrope walker, an acrobat, a buffoon) (p. 418), as the latter word is often associated with the working classes. Johnston and Bradford (2022) research on working-class male students undertaking care-based degrees demonstrates the impact of class and gender from a masculine perspective. The WCA men they interviewed felt that they were somehow trespassing in the care field. Whereas Watts (2015) noted in his autobiographical chapter that ‘being a reader with a good memory and some facility at writing made me a bit odd’ (p. 21). This illustrates the unique challenges faced by WCA men as working-class masculinities may clash with academic pursuits such as reading (Wilhelm & Smith, 2014).

The following section, including [Table 2](#), outlines details of the respondents who took part in this research according to their gender.

In Phases One and Three of the research, there were a significantly greater number of female respondents compared to males. Phase two had a more even gender division although female respondents still formed the majority.

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780429330384-15/riding-auto-biographical-phd-rollercoaster-robin-hadley>

Table 2. Gender of Respondents According to Each Research Phase.

Phase One		Phase Two		Phase Three		
<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Rather not say.</i>
26	66	31	42	23	65	1 <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>One respondent within the survey (Phase Three) indicated ‘rather not say’ in response to a question about gender and then a voluntary question about whether the gender they identified with was the same as your sex registered at birth.

Within the academic context, intersectionality recognises that individuals may encounter distinct challenges and advantages arising from the intersection of their various identities. The narratives illuminated the intersectionality of class and gender within the academic landscape. For instance, Harriet, a Senior Lecturer in Criminology, spoke of accent bias, referring to the mockery she had faced for her accent and the gendered expectations in academic roles. Orla, a Tutor of Economic and Social History at a Russell Group institution, also reported instances of mockery related to her (Scottish) accent. Orla referred to examples of gender bias being evident as she talked of being treated differently from her male colleagues, with students using titles like ‘Miss’ or ‘Ms’ instead of ‘Dr’. Zara, a Research Fellow in History affiliated with a Russell Group university, encountered accent bias too: ‘*I frequently feel that my accent and appearance are subjected to judgment*’. She referred to challenges as she was precariously employed, which exacerbated for Zara, who, without family support, found herself unable to easily relocate, limiting her networking opportunities. Despite these challenges, Zara talked about how her experiences had equipped her with the ability to connect with non-traditional students – something that should make her an asset within the institution. These experiences are particularly challenging for WCA women as they face double bias (gender & class), leading to layered discrimination and pressure to constantly prove themselves.

Overall n. 12 respondents (n. 9 females) acknowledged their experience with bullying by checking the corresponding checkbox in the survey. This matched research by Simpson and Cohen (2004) who found there was a significantly higher proportion of women who experienced bullying. Few respondents (n2) provided written accounts of bullying in their surveys, with both examples coming from men. The Anti Bullying Alliance defines bullying as ‘the repetitive, intentional hurting of one person or group by another person or group, where the relationship involves an imbalance of power. It can happen face to face or online’. Workplace bullying can include a wide spectrum of actions, including (1) Verbal abuse – such as demeaning personal attacks, (2) Public email, or social media shaming – can be in person in a meeting, via group, and (3) Isolation – being cut off from colleagues who can support you. Bullying within academia is a complex phenomenon and can manifest among individuals of any gender, class, or background, although targets of bullying are often the most vulnerable members of

the workforce (Mahmoudi, 2020; Tight, 2023), i.e. people on casualised contracts and early career researchers (ECRs). Both narratives in my data drew attention to the issue of social class within academia. Archie, a Head of School and Professor at a Russell Group institution, disclosed ‘*persistent bullying*’ in academia. Archie’s experience included being ‘*constantly bullied and dismissed by middle-class women, while snooty men just ignore me*’. Bobby, a Lecturer and Researcher in Sociology at two institutions, talked of having had an awful time in academia, referring to a ‘*weird middle class sterilised passive aggressive culture*’. Archie’s narrative, particularly the use of ‘*constantly*’ suggests that it wasn’t an isolated incident but a recurring pattern. Bobby’s narrative implies a sense of difference or a cultural clash from the restrained atmosphere in academia. As academia involves hierarchical power structures, if middle-class academic women (as referred to by Archie), hold positions of power or perceive themselves as having more status, they might misuse this power dynamic. The competition for resources, recognition, and opportunities in academia may also lead to bullying behaviours as individuals vie for limited positions or resources. Stereotypes about WCA men as either being more privileged due to their gender or being perceived as having less prestigious educational backgrounds, thus, being less competent or capable, appeared to contribute to these discriminatory actions.

One respondent, Riley, a Lecturer in Education at a traditional institution, who did not give details of their gender identity faced classism, accent bias, and a lack of opportunities within their department. Riley expressed scepticism about the potential for change in academia they believed that research like ‘this’ provides a platform for WCAs to speak openly about their experiences. Riley’s narrative highlights the multifaceted challenges faced by WCAs in academia, extending beyond gender identity to encompass issues of class, social background, and personal expression. Their experiences of feeling excluded and undervalued highlight the pervasive nature of classism and accent bias within academic settings. The experiences of Riley and other WCAs underscore the need for continued efforts to promote equity and inclusion in academia.

There was one key theme found in the data in relation to the intersection of class and gender in academia.

### ***Academic Housekeeping***

Academic or institutional housekeeping refers to administrative or service tasks such as advising students, mentoring colleagues, reviewing for journals or grant awarding bodies, serving on committees, contributing expertise to civic and charitable bodies, etc. (Macfarlane, 2018), that are usually performed without resources and little recognition (Bird et al., 2004). As perhaps is to be expected, women in academia are disproportionately burdened with these nonpromotable tasks (Van Veelen & Derks, 2022). Hochschild’s (1979, 2003) concept of “emotional labour” illuminates the demands created by the feminisation of academic labour. Macfarlane (2018) notes that male academics do engage in this form of ‘housework’, it’s just that women usually contribute more. In their book

*The No Club*, Babcock et al. (2022) demonstrated that women are 44% more likely to be asked to do academic housekeeping and are 50% more likely to say yes to this work in comparison to men. A paper by Wilson et al. (2021) in part talks of the ‘guilty burden of pastoral care’ (p. 5), where mainly female academics are ‘over-worked...pressurised and overburdened by the volume of pastoral cases’ (Wilson et al., 2021).

In all, 51% (n. 84) of my female respondents and 38% (n. 31) of my male respondents referred to academic housekeeping. Within universities, work is categorised into core and support activities. Core activities for faculty primarily revolve around teaching, grant writing, publishing, and disseminating scholarly work. Whereas ‘service’ activities, often perceived as less prestigious, encompass tasks such as committee work, advising students, and making civic contributions (Bird et al., 2004; Hochschild, 1979 & 2003). Despite the indispensability of all these activities, they are not uniformly valued. There exists a hierarchy in the perception of their importance and prestige within the academic landscape. Among my own respondents, gender disparities in the participation of academic activities were evident, with male WCAs being more likely to serve as editors (a prestigious admin task). Male WCAs also reported a higher likelihood of participating in open days. When probed about the reasons behind this, three male WCA respondents attributed it to what they perceived as their female colleagues having to unfairly shoulder additional caregiving responsibilities, such as childcare and looking after family members. Female WCAs were typically involved in the full range of tasks cited above, in particular participating in committees and helping students in need of support. These time-consuming tasks were so commonly gendered that female respondents such as Margaret, a Lecturer in Education at a Russell Group institution, noted that *‘being a woman academic means doing all the bullshit jobs and not being promoted like men are’*. While I don’t have data on how this affected pay and promotions, female respondents referred to these tasks as being both low in status and invisible.

My respondents perceived there to be a classed element to academic housekeeping as they felt, in comparison to their more elite peers, they would be more likely to understand the difficulties faced by students, particularly those from working-class backgrounds. Mazurek (2009) argued that WCA women are often encouraged to embrace nurturing and service roles within the profession. Petra, a Lecturer in Human Geography at a traditional institution, posits that this tendency may arise from the fact that WCAs like herself often demonstrate a robust sense of compassion and care for their students due to the relatability they share. She proceeded to suggest that this does not imply that individuals from economically, socially, or culturally privileged backgrounds are not caring towards their students. Petra hypothesised that WCAs might demonstrate a heightened level of investment in their students’ well-being, rooted in a desire to shield their students from the challenges and hardships they themselves had experienced. WCAs, motivated by their own backgrounds and past struggles, often gravitated towards fostering a positive and nurturing learning environment, aspiring to be the educators they yearned for during their own academic pursuits. The male WCAs I

interviewed also talked about the pastoral care they provided to students, a trait typically associated with female academics.

*I'll spend up to an hour to speak to the students one on one, because I enjoy it. But ...I suppose that ends up being quite popular with other students and therefore taken full advantage of by other staff. [Samuel, a Teacher in Classics & Ancient History at a Russell Group institution]*

*The biggest contribution is the way I teach. I've been through an educational system that I found to be very tough so I know what kind of teacher I don't want to be like [Ethan, Graduate Student in Sociology at a Russell Group institution]*

Samuel's interactions with students appear to stem from his genuine interest in teaching and supporting students. However, he also expressed concern that his willingness to go above and beyond might lead to others taking advantage of him, a concern also observed by most of my female respondents. This raised questions about the fair allocation of workloads and highlighted the importance for institutions to recognise (potentially through remuneration and acknowledgement in promotion) these voluntary efforts. All of the male WCAs I interviewed who mentioned such tasks, even Samuel who certainly appeared to do his 'fair share', acknowledged that their female counterparts were much more likely to do more of the academic housework in their institution. Furthermore, respondents such as Lucas, Senior Lecturer in Health at a traditional institution, perceived that their administrative work may receive greater recognition for promotion purposes compared to their female colleagues.

## Ethnicity

Statistical data from HESA in 2021/2022 revealed that of academic staff with declared ethnicity, 72% were White, 3% Black, 11% Asian, 3% Mixed, 3% 'Others', and 9% 'Unknown' (HESA, 2023).<sup>2</sup> Academics defined as ethnic minorities remain underrepresented at senior levels. Of 21,760 professors with known ethnicity, only 12% were ethnic minorities – 65% who identify as an ethnic minority were Asian (HESA, 2023). There has been a historical failure to recognise Black scholars, something that persists today, as there is both an invisibility and hyper-visibility that many WCA academics of colour face, i.e. they are both invisible in terms of recognised competence yet are scrutinised and expected to be tokens of diversity (Lander & Santoro, 2017). Despite the posters of contented-looking people of colour adorning these institutions, the stark reality persists: universities often articulate their 'commitment to diversity' through speech acts rather

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<sup>2</sup>These percentages are rounded up so will not add up to 100.

than substantive and meaningful practices (Ahmed, 2007). Research finds that academics of colour experience isolation, lack of support, and devaluation of their work (Turner et al., 2008 cited in Bhopal, 2022). Alongside this, a report by Karran and Mallinson (2017) revealed that when compared to White staff, ethnic minorities reported significantly higher rates of disciplinary threats, were denied promotions, and faced infringements on academic freedom due to their gender or race. Joseph Salisbury's research (2021) illuminates that ethnic minorities frequently face scepticism regarding their qualifications and/or intellectual capabilities. On the flip side, they are sometimes praised in a patronising manner for their articulateness.

Class and ethnicity intersect in complex ways, not as isolated categories (Ferree, 1990). For instance, Mahony and Zmroczek (1997) talked of how some of the black female academics of African and African Caribbean origin she spoke to mentioned that despite their middle-class accents, it was frequently presumed that they were working class (p. 21). Working class women of colour, who typically experienced classed, gendered, and racialised biases (Hills Collins, 2019), faced stigma as intellectually deficient and tended to be subjected to harmful stereotypes as lazy and undeserving (Gorski, 2012). The effects of these intersections are still evident within UK academia. For instance, Bhopal's 2014 report on Black British academics outlines how they face triple glass ceilings due to intersecting gender, ethnicity, and class barriers, evidenced by severe underrepresentation at senior levels. In a report for a University and College Union by Nicola Rollock (2019), interviews with 20 black female professors in the UK revealed that these scholars faced a culture of passive bullying and racial micro-aggressions that narrowed their chances of promotion. Alongside this, Akbar (2022) talked of his journey into academia from an intersectional perspective of being British-born, of Pakistani heritage and a Muslim male, noting that intersections of classist and racist discourses operated to alienate and exclude him in academia.

Table 3 shows that in Phase One of the research, the majority of respondents were White, with 77 individuals falling into this category. Owing to the structure of how the data in this phase was recorded, 22 respondents were classified as being 'BME'. In Phase Two, White respondents formed the majority (n.68) of interviewees, there was an increase in respondents from diverse ethnic backgrounds – notably, there are 6 respondents from the Asian or Asian British category, n. 3 from Black or Black British (Caribbean or African), n. 2 from Mixed or multiple ethnic groups, and n.6 did not give details of their ethnicity. In Phase Three, the distribution of respondents across ethnic groups was similar to Phase Two, with slight fluctuations in the number of White respondents (n. 68), and those who did not give their ethnicity (n. 6).<sup>3</sup>

Respondents revealed that they faced a myriad of challenges within academic spaces. For instance, Ari, a male of Asian British ethnicity, aged 36–45, shared a compelling narrative focusing on the intricate layers of his identity. Teaching Arabic Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at a prestigious Russell Group

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<sup>3</sup>One respondent in the survey left the question blank.

Table 3. Ethnicity of Respondents According to Each Research Phase.

	Phase One	Phase Two	Phase Three
Asian or Asian British	0	1	6
Black, Black British, Caribbean or African	0	3	1
Mixed or multiple ethnic groups	0	2	3
White	72	68	74
Not listed <sup>a</sup>	0	0	6
BME <sup>b</sup>	20	0	0

<sup>a</sup> Not listed was given as an option but respondents did not or were unable to write the ethnicity in the space given.

<sup>b</sup> In 2021, the UK government stopped using the terms BAME (black, Asian and minority ethnic) and BME (black and minority ethnic). One of the recommendations, found in a final report on COVID-19 disparities, was that researchers should refer to ethnic minority groups individually, rather than as a single group. There are limitations with the term BME as it homogenises people from minority ethnic backgrounds. When conducting the interviews for Crew (2020), I recorded the individual ethnicity of respondents in the book, but when I recorded their ethnicity in the appendix of the book, I used the term BME. I have felt uncomfortable using this term so moving forward in the next phase of the research I have used individual ethnic groups, or people of colour when referring to ethnicity.

institution, Ari highlighted challenges encompassing classism, accent bias, and microaggressions. His experiences, rooted in racism and Islamophobia due to his Muslim Indian heritage and working-class background, exposed pervasive biases within the academic environment, emanating from both colleagues and students. Alongside this, Sabin, a Lecturer in Education Studies, talked of enduring racism and classism in his professional life. Similarly, Ari, specialising in Islamic Studies at a Russell Group institution, emphasised the intersectionality of discrimination due to his Muslim Indian heritage and working-class background. Their accounts also highlight the complexity of challenges faced by male WCA. The status of being male and an academic often entails patriarchal privileges within elite structures designed to subordinate and exclude women. However, Black WCA men encounter a dual disadvantage due to the convergence of their ethnicity (being black) and their socioeconomic status (working class). Alongside this, Black academics (male and female) are often subjected to excessive scrutiny, potentially leading to them being overlooked for promotions (Bhopal & Jackson, 2013). Both these factors can independently contribute to social inequalities, and their intersection compounds the challenges faced by these individuals, such as discrimination.

Isla,<sup>4</sup> a female working in Education, at a traditional university had an academic journey marked by financial constraints and isolation. Facing challenges

<sup>4</sup>Isla referred to her ethnicity as being not listed. As discussed previously, not listed was given as an option but respondents did not or were unable to write the ethnicity in the space given.

on short-term contracts in her early career, she encountered a lack of understanding from colleagues about the financial struggles associated with academia. Alfie, a Black British, Caribbean, or African male, pursuing a PhD in Sports Science at a post-1992 institution, referred to *'the daunting reality of academic precarity and insecure contracts'*, highlighting his lack of economic capital. Despite these hurdles, Alfie observed that his institution was welcoming to people from diverse backgrounds, which signals a potential positive shift in inclusivity. Amelia, a female in the 46–55 age group pursuing a PhD in Global Health at a Russell Group institution, also shared a narrative that revealed struggles with academic precarity, alongside many other issues, i.e. isolation, difficulties fitting in, and confrontations with classism, microaggressions, and discrimination. Research tells us that ethnic minorities continue to be both underrepresented in universities, and more likely to be on precarious contracts (Baltaru, 2023). While my early research revealed a disproportionate likelihood for WCAs with a disability to encounter casualisation, I observed a similar trend among WCAs of colour, although to a lesser extent. While my data didn't reveal specific reasons, existing research on ethnic minority academics (Bhopal, various; Joseph-Salisbury, 2021; Rollock, 2019), this could be influenced by various inter-connected factors such as structural inequities, implicit bias and discrimination may be factors.

There were two key themes found in the data in terms of the intersection of class and ethnicity in academia.

### **Representation**

Despite efforts to diversify academia, WCAs of colour remain underrepresented across UK higher education, especially at senior levels (Arday, 2018; Rollock, 2019). While aiming to recruit a diverse pool of WCAs of colour for this research, I recognised that their underrepresentation might reflect the wider WCA population. The reasons for this *possible* disparity are multifaceted and may vary by region and according to institution. Some contributing factors include; structural inequities such as systemic racism and discrimination; unconscious bias as well as cultural expectations. This lack of representation can be difficult because as Flynn, a Lecturer in Health at a traditional institution, noted, *'being the only Black academic often means getting treated as the token "Black representative" who can speak for everyone'*. Flynn's observation about tokenisation suggests that institutions may view diversity as a box to be ticked rather than valuing the unique contributions and expertise of individual academics. Other respondents also expressed concerns about being treated as tokens of diversity. Joy, a Senior Lecturer in Social Sciences at a Russell Group institution, commented that her research expertise was overlooked in order for her to 'tick boxes', she said *'I was made diversity champion despite directing major research projects. My qualifications as a Director of Research were ignored'*. Flynn's and Joy's experiences highlight significant challenges related to diversity and representation within academia, particularly for Black academics. Joy's experience reveals a different facet of the problem, that institutional efforts to address diversity can sometimes be superficial, rather than focusing on substantive change.

### *Classed and Racial Microaggressions*

Even though class identities are fluid, Wong (2022) recalls that when he describes his identity as being a ‘working class Chinese man from a small seaside town in Malaysia’ he often receives pushback. He describes one of those incidents here:

*I tried to explain my humble origins by uttering ‘I’m just a working class Chinese boy from a small seaside town in Malaysia’ but with her eyes narrowed, she replied, ‘There are many things I could say about you, Steve, but working class isn’t one of them’. I wanted to defend my statement, but her facial expression spoke volumes.*

Wong’s research describes the subtle (and not so subtle) microaggressions that ethnic minority WCAs of colour experience in academia. Various studies (Gabriel & Tate, 2017; Johnson & Joseph-Salisbury, 2018; Morrison et al., 2023; Rollock, 2019; Sian, 2017) have all found racial microaggressions were a common experience for academics from ethnic minorities in the UK. In all, 36% (n. 15) of my respondents who were WCAs of colour experienced frequent racially and classed informed questioning of their qualifications and competence. For example, Theo, a Politics Research Fellow<sup>5</sup> recalled being praised as he was ‘articulate’, implying surprise at their skills. ‘*What they meant was I am very articulate for a black guy*’ (Crew, 2020, p. 87). Theo’s quotation refers to a problematic racial stereotype, the ‘articulate black man’. This trope suggests that Black men are not typically well-spoken, so when they are, it is seen as exceptional or surprising. This reinforces racial bias by implying that Black people should conform to lower expectations regarding their communication skills. Hall (2001) theorises that this distressing stereotype is related to the supposed ‘ability of African American men to threaten America’s masculine male power structure’ (p. 114). This stereotype can be marginalising because it perpetuates the idea that being articulate is unexpected or unusual for a Black person.

McGee and Martin (2011) provided numerous examples of classed/racial microaggressions such as Black STEM students being mistaken for janitorial staff. In my interview with Joy, a Senior Lecturer in Social Sciences at a Russell Group institution, she recalled being asked for her ID when entering buildings with White colleagues who weren’t questioned. This experience was recalled by three other respondents. Joy went on to say that she was once required to ask for the head of her school to come to ‘*vouch for me*’. Joy’s experience points to a distressing instance of systemic racism and implicit bias. Moreover, the incident where she had to request the head of her school to vouch for her, is a clear example of the extra burdens and mental load faced by people of colour in academia. Such situations highlight the need for greater awareness, education, and institutional changes to combat racism and promote inclusivity in higher education.

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<sup>5</sup>Respondent didn’t give details of his institution.

Dismissing or avoiding discussions of racial, and or class bias was also something my WCA respondents of colour experienced in academia. Joy, from the previous paragraph, provides a further example:

*I was in a meeting and the topic of racial bias in academia arose. Remember I'm the only person from a BME background there. The head of school brushes the comment aside, saying now was not the time or place to discuss this, but we should be certain that there are no issues with race in our school. And if anyone thinks there is, then they need to take better advantage of the resources on at the university. I sat there flabbergasted, knowing I should speak out, but I was one person. What a way of shutting down any discussion!* (Crew, 2020)

The various instances of racial microaggressions and biases, of which there were many, among WCA respondents of colour, highlight the inappropriate assumptions based on appearance that some ethnic minorities can often face. The supposed need to prove their identity or status is not an example of security features in action at an institution but is an overt manifestation of racial bias. Joy's quotation emphasised that these daily microaggressions collectively contribute to a culture of exclusion for WCA of colour and can have detrimental effects on the emotional well-being.

Before moving to the next section, which focuses on disability, it is crucial to acknowledge that White researchers, including myself, often face challenges when recruiting participants from diverse ethnic backgrounds (Farooqi et al., 2022). Unethical research practices in the past have sown seeds of mistrust towards research institutions and researchers, particularly within ethnic minority communities.<sup>6</sup> Building rapport and trust with potential respondents from ethnic minority backgrounds can be challenging due to this inherent mistrust. White researchers may lack cultural sensitivity and access to minority networks, hindering connection, communication, and recruitment (Prinjha et al., 2020). Conscious of these challenges, I highlighted the study's focus on ethnicity and promoted it widely (e.g., approaching WCAs of colour, asked respondents to nominate people, advertising via Twitter/X, webinars, conferences). These strategies increased the numbers of ethnic minority WCA respondents in Phase One, but there was still scope to recruit more respondents.

While my findings have added to the literature on the diversity of WCAs, my findings in relation to class, ethnicity and gender needed more definition. Reflecting upon my approach, and having conducted research with the community, I was able to recruit Gypsy Roma Traveller WCAs. It is clear that moving forward I

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<sup>6</sup>A famous example of an unethical research study is the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, often referred to as the Tuskegee Experiment, a notorious and unethical clinical study conducted by the US Public Health Service, from 1932 to 1972.

need to develop my networks with other WCAs from ethnic minorities. I have also recommended that existing support networks for WCAs represent the full diversity of WCAs.

## Disability

The number of staff known to have a disability increased by 2,645 compared to 2020/2021<sup>7</sup> (HESA, 2023). In all, 4% of academics with a disability were professors; 5% of ‘other senior academics’ had a disability, as did 6% of academics defined as ‘other contract level’. This is likely to have been underreported as 14.6 million people in the UK had a disability in the 2020/2021 financial year, representing 22% of the total population (UK Parliament, 2023). Universities, historically structured for able-bodied academic staff (Stone et al., 2013), have witnessed the emergence of a performance-driven working culture due to heightened globalisation, marketisation, and bureaucratisation in higher education (Brown & Leigh, 2018). Consequently, individuals with disabilities may opt not to disclose their disability status, potentially influenced by the prevailing working environment. This decision may also be because an academic’s worth is often categorised by whether their institution views them as ‘earners’ or ‘costers’ (Brown & Leigh, 2018, p. 265). Academics who secure research grants, attract students, or engage in activities that contribute to the institution’s financial success are regarded as ‘earners’. These academics are valuable assets that bring prestige. This emphasis on revenue generation can incentivise types of research, teaching or activities that attract more funding or students. Academics who are not great income generators or whose work is not financially lucrative may be categorised as ‘costers’. In this context, the value of their contributions may influence their job security and professional recognition. Brown and Leigh (2018) felt academics with disabilities have two choices regarding disclosure: one entails revealing the disability, allowing for access to specific forms of support and identification as someone with a disability, while the other option involves refraining from disclosing the disability and then avoid potential discrimination and stigma (p. 987).

A report by Sang (2017) found that academics with disabilities experience a number of barriers to full participation in academic life, ranging from a lack of access to reasonable adjustments (RAs) to fatigue and inaccessibility of buildings (for teaching, meetings, informal social interactions, etc.). When the intersection of social class is considered, academics encounter barriers rooted in both classism and ableism. For example, classist assumptions of intellectual inferiority become compounded with assumptions of physical or mental deficiency (Dolmage, 2017). An elite/middle-class academic with a disability may have more resources, so differences in social class may counteract the effects of disability. Class privilege, for example, might afford better medical treatment, a resource potentially unavailable

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<sup>7</sup>Scottish HE providers account for 1,115 of this increase which is largely thought to be attributed to a change in reporting practice.

to a WCA with a disability who does not have comparable economic resources. Waterfield et al. (2018) drew on Garland Thomson (2011) concepts of ‘fit’ and ‘misfit’ to exemplify how university environments can significantly contribute to the experience of disability. This concept of ‘fit’ and ‘misfit’ revolves around the notion that the physical and social environments of universities can either accommodate or hinder the well-being and success of people with disabilities. In an inclusive and accommodating setting, they may experience a better ‘fit’, where they can effectively navigate and thrive within their academic roles. Adding the intersection of class to this emphasises further ways that they may or may not ‘fit in the academic environment’. Overall, these studies demonstrate that socioeconomic status can either compound or help overcome some aspects of disability marginalisation. However, there was a lack of research on the intersections of class and disability in terms of academics. As Maamri and Dipper (2021) noted that having low socioeconomic status and a disability can lead to a double disadvantage when it comes to social mobility, further research on WCAs with disabilities is increasingly important.

Table 4 outlines the details of the respondents who took part in this research according to their disability.

Table 4. Respondents with a Disability or Long-Term Illness According to Each Research Phase.

Phase One		Phase Two		Phase Three <sup>a</sup>		
Does not have a disability	Has a disability	Does not have a disability	Has a disability	Does not have a disability	Has a disability	Rather not say
86	6	61	12	57	33	1

<sup>a</sup> One respondent in phase three said ‘Rather not say’ when asked ‘Do you have a health condition or disability that will last for 12 months or more?’

Across the three phases, there was a noticeable shift in the composition of participants with a disability. Phase One predominantly comprised respondents without disabilities, while Phase Three exhibited a significant increase in the number of participants with disabilities. This transition towards a more inclusive representation of participants with disabilities in Phase Three can be attributed to a deliberate change in the research study’s recruitment approach. From Phase Two, there was an explicit emphasis on recruiting respondents based on multiple intersecting factors, including ethnicity and disability. This expanded outreach likely played a pivotal role in diversifying the respondent ‘pool’, leading to a more representative and inclusive sample in later phases.

The narratives of WCAs with disabilities highlight the complexities they face in HE. For instance, Demi, an Associate PVC Education and Deputy Dean, Business and Law at a post-1992 institution, narrated a disheartening incident during a staff seminar where she shared her PhD thesis. Instead of receiving support and acknowledgement of her disability (ADHD), she faced the adverse reaction of

several academic colleagues walking out. This incident emphasised there can be a lack of understanding and empathy within the academic community towards individuals with invisible disabilities. Nicola, an academic in History at a post-1992 institution, emphasised the discrimination she had experienced:

*I think I am discriminated against most for being disabled. It's small microaggressions and because of all the equality and diversity groups, the least understood in higher education.*

While I did not uncover existing research to directly support Nicole's claim that disability is the 'least' understood within equality and diversity frameworks, subsequent sections clearly demonstrate the significant challenges faced by WCAs with disabilities.

Sienna, a Professor of Engineering Education at a small specialist university, talked about the difficulties of being neurodiverse and not having an instinctive understanding of unwritten rules, particularly when coming from a background with limited exposure to certain norms.

*I was an engineering professional before I became an academic and would ever have been able to go directly into academia – nobody in my family even had GCSEs/O levels. Being neurodiverse means unwritten and hidden rules are particularly confusing and opaque – this is compounded when you don't come from a background where you instinctively know what to wear, how to address people, how to pronounce certain words and so on.*

The statement supports existing research that has found that the 'hidden curriculum', in universities can marginalise minoritised groups such as neurodivergent students, hindering their ability to fully realise their potential (Sulaimani & Gut, 2019). Sienna observed that Engineering, her field of study, is especially conducive to WCAs, particularly those who are neurodiverse. She justified this perspective by highlighting the explicit rules, relative meritocracy, and greater tolerance for straightforward communication within the discipline compared to others. The assessment of the 'rules' in Engineering and the ease of having blunt conversations is challenging to comment on without further evidence. Also, embracing the notion of engineering as a meritocracy implies that the observed under representation of women (as well as ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds) are underrepresented in the engineering profession (EngineeringUK, 2022), must result from fair and meritocratic processes. Luna, a respondent with multiple intersections – a Lecturer in Creative Writing at an institution established in 1963, a WCA, and a single parent with ADHD – shared a narrative similar to Sienna, as she too emphasised the difficulties of navigating the unspoken rules of academia. The experiences of these respondents highlight the need for greater awareness and accommodation for individuals with invisible disabilities within academic institutions.

There were three key themes found in the data in terms of the intersection of class and disability in academia.

### ***Precarity***

The intersection of disability and class in academia reveals a challenging landscape. Jetha et al. (2020) have found that individuals with disabilities are more likely to find themselves in precarious, low-paid, and insecure job positions. This intersectionality is further illuminated by Moser's (2006) study, who highlighted how class factors into the disability equation as those with social, cultural, and financial resources have a privileged position. The precarious nature of employment faced by disabled academics becomes apparent when examining the reliance on fixed-term contracts among interview participants. In Phase One, all five academics with disabilities were on precarious contracts. Although Phases Two and Three revealed fewer respondents who were *currently* on precarious contracts, respondents still reported that they had previously experienced precarity, and that their casualised contracts ranged from as little as four hours per week to full-time positions. WCAs with disabilities talked about the prevalence of short-term and fixed-term contracts throughout their academic careers. For instance, Petra, a Lecturer in Human Geography at a traditional institution shared that she had '*been shuffled between temporary lectureships on five different contracts in three years*'. This trend mirrors a broader pattern where individuals with disabilities are not only disproportionately represented in insecure appointments but are often caught in a cycle of short-term posts rather than gaining stable employment or career progression (Dolmage, 2017). These contracts offer little job security and lead to a constant state of uncertainty about future employment. The challenge for WCA respondents with disabilities being on fixed-term contracts is that it exacerbates the vulnerabilities they already face due to their disabilities. For instance, most who had experienced precarity mentioned the importance of financial support, as they were typically not able to borrow money from their parents.

My WCA respondents with disabilities reported that the constant pressure and instability of temporary academic appointments took a significant toll on both their disability-related and general health. Almost 40% (n. 19) of WCA respondents with disabilities reported heightened anxiety and stress from both the lack of job security and the ongoing need to '*prove themselves*' [April, a Lecturer in Biomedical Sciences at a traditional institution]. Furthermore, some WCA respondents with disabilities shared experiences of delaying disability-related healthcare, such as physical therapy, surgeries, or mental health services appointments, and avoiding regular check-ups. These respondents hesitated to request medical leave or reduced hours during disability flare-ups or prolonged illnesses, fearing potential repercussions on contract renewals. This hesitancy stemmed from both the financial implications of turning down work and the anxiety of jeopardising their already precarious positions, as also highlighted in Grimshaw et al. (2016) and Hadjisolomou et al. (2021). The consequence of these actions for my respondents was an elevated risk of health conditions worsening in the case of Brandon,

a Teaching Assistant in Health Studies at a post-1992 institution. Respondents were also constrained by tight budgets that compelled them to compromise their well-being, sacrificing anything from their nutrition to self-care, as outlined by April, simply to meet essential expenses. In essence, the intersection of disability and class in academia illustrated persistent challenges, spanning from employment insecurity to health risks.

### *Reasonable Adjustments*

Pearson and Boskovich (2019) found that academics with a disability face a multitude of challenges within the academic landscape, ranging from physical accessibility to administrative hurdles, often compounded by limited financial resources. My own respondents talked of how navigating these obstacles could be likened to an additional, unwanted full-time job. Despite the Equality Act 2010, inequalities can still persist, as evidenced by the ongoing struggles of academics with disabilities to obtain RAs (Inckle, 2018). Academics with disabilities often find themselves in protracted battles with rigid university bureaucracies, where even basic RAs or accommodations could be met with denial or insufficient provisions. requesting accommodations might overburden their already understaffed colleagues. My WCA respondents with disabilities talked of resorting to masking their needs to appear ‘normative’, as they felt they had a challenging predicament:

*I have never ever asked for those. I'm not sure they would be granted. I think they would be talking me into redundancy.* [Elijah, Head of History at a traditional institution]

Elijah’s remark denoted a common fear among academics with disabilities, which is the reluctance to request accommodations for disabilities, even though RAs are guaranteed in law. He suggests that he has refrained from seeking RA due to concerns about job security and the potential negative perceptions of colleagues or superiors. Elijah’s reference to the possibility of being ‘*talked into redundancy*’ emphasised the precarious nature of academic positions, particularly for those on fixed-term contracts or in roles with limited job security. Elijah’s statement hints at the potential discrimination that WCAs with disabilities may face within their institutions.

My respondents referred to the consequences of working without the necessary RAs as being profound, often resulting in burnout and a compromise of their overall well-being and mental health, a point also highlighted by Inckle (2018).

*I enjoy this job, its fascinating but I've done it so long without reasonable adjustments that I'm losing that enjoyment and it's making it harder to function. I feel I'm walking in treacle, feeling quite down.* [Amelia, a Senior Lecturer in Social Sciences at a Russell Group institution]

*I'm struggling to keep up with marking my assessments, and writing lecture slides each week. I'm exhausted and depressed.* [Margaret, a Lecturer in Education at a Russell Group institution]

Both respondents describe feelings of burnout, exhaustion, and depression, illustrating the broader issue of the need for institutions to provide appropriate support and RAs to prevent burnout among their staff. However, at the end of their interviews, both Margaret and Amelia expanded on their experiences and referred to feeling like their disabilities were under constant observation and evaluation by their superiors (something also referred to by Gil Gomez, 2017). This atmosphere of scrutiny left them hesitant to request RAs, as they felt it would be perceived as seeking charity rather than advocating for necessary, and lawful, accommodations. This fear of judgement and reluctance to seek the support they need further highlighted the importance of promoting discussions about RAs so that individuals could access the necessary assistance without fear of stigma or prejudice.

Precarity also had an impact as WCAs with disabilities were frustrated that they were often required to repeatedly navigate bureaucratic processes to secure RAs with each contract renewal and at each new institution. Yvonne, a Lecturer in Health and Social Care, at a Russell Group institution, expressed concerns about her contract ending, saying she'll have to start '*all over, persuading a new university to accommodate me*'. Instead of establishing stable support systems, WCAs with disabilities found themselves in a constant battle for their support needs. April, a Lecturer in Biomedical Sciences at a traditional institution, told me how she would face extra academic work due to her disability. She would be required to coordinate and ensure access to teaching buildings, which added to her workload despite support for students with disabilities being available (Crew, 2020). Some respondents who had experienced these difficulties, referred to the need for a central place to record RAs so that details could be updated in and between contracts.

### *Conferences*

Attending academic conferences is crucial for scholars to present research, build professional and cultural capital, and foster collaborations. Precarious academics face even greater challenges when attending conferences due to their economic instability (Grimshaw et al., 2016). For instance, Samuels (2017) found academics with disabilities often could not afford expenses related to disability needs, such as assistive technologies or conference attendance due to low pay in insecure roles. As Mark a Lecturer in Engineering<sup>8</sup> said; '*Funding for conferences is nigh impossible and if you can't afford to pay...you don't develop that all important social capital*' (Crew, 2020, p. 60). Those relying on part-time stipends faced particular struggles making ends meet. Without family wealth to draw on, my WCAs with

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<sup>8</sup>Mark preferred not to give details of his institution.

disabilities reported a lack of finances to attend conferences. Even small expenses required for equitable participation, like taxis to campus when unable to use public transport, became burdens for my respondents. Respondents, both with and without disabilities talked of their concerns that conferences for academics with disabilities were not always fit for purpose. These classed/disability-related disadvantages restricted access to vital networking opportunities. As with research by Brown and Leigh (2018), my respondents found that inclusion often comes with hidden costs, for instance, paying for personal assistants to enable conference participation, and having to pay costs upfront.

There have been attempts to tackle these issues. The organisers of *Ableism in Academia* conference aimed to demonstrate the achievability of inclusive practice as well as demonstrate best practice in conference organisation. The conference received overwhelmingly positive feedback for its focus on accessibility as it allowed them to participate from the comfort of their homes. Conference organisers made efforts to cater to diverse needs, creating a comfortable atmosphere where attendees felt free to be themselves. Notable aspects included sending conference packs to delegates and providing a sit-down lunch, fostering a more relaxed environment for discussion (Brown et al., 2018).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>They have created a one-page summary<sup>9</sup> of the strategies discussed in the article, emphasising the importance of accessibility in academia.