# Precarity



**Fig. 3.1** 'Precarity'

## Introduction

The global economy has gone through seismic change over the last thirty years. One such example was highlighted by Guy Standing (2011), who talked of how a precarious existence, one that is lacking in predictability, job security, material or psychological welfare, is becoming the norm in many industries, including academia. As mentioned in Chap. 1, just under half of my respondents (n. 41), were on various forms of 'fixed term' contracts. I devote a chapter to this subject as precarity is a classed issue. As Talia says: "*everything is enhanced when you are working class*". Having economic capital 'buys' you the time and space to manage insecure contracts, and to further develop other forms of capital which may offer opportunities to move from precarity to permanency.

## Numbers of Precarious Academics in Academia

It is notoriously difficult to calculate the exact number of casualised workers in universities as reliable information about research and teaching contracts can be difficult to access and, individual situations differ across departments and institutions. Courtois and O'Keefe (2019) also report that casual employees are hard to reach or may be scared to discuss their experiences. One very recent example of the latter can be found in my interview with Pam, a graduate teaching assistant in Economics at a traditional institution. In 2018, 2019, and 2020 there were a series of connected strikes in Higher and Further Education. Pam revealed that she felt awkward whenever the strikes were mentioned as she felt she should strike because she is on a temporary contract and wanted to show solidarity. But due to her "frighteningly precarious financial situation" she could not afford to do this.

Data from the Higher Education Statistic Agency (HESA) shows that 34 per cent of academic staff were employed on fixed-term contracts in 2017/18 (HESA 2020). This is lower than levels of precarity found among my own respondents. Yet, HESA data is inconsistent as they do not collect information on the length or type of contracts, or on the use of hourly-paid staff. It only collects data on the balance of fixed-term contracts, as against open-ended contracts, and on the use of 'atypical' contracts—those which are not 'employment' contracts and have a high level of flexibility. When the use of atypical academic staff is factored in 54 per cent of all academic staff and 49 per cent of all academic teaching staff are

on insecure contracts (University and College Union 2016). These statistics contrast further with those from the Universities and Colleges Employers Association (UCEA) who claim there only 3.2 per cent of full-time equivalent academic workforce are on 'atypical' contracts, and they arise from universities' need for "skilled professionals contributing specialist teaching". Hunt (2016) notes that as around 90 per cent were paid at junior lecturer level or below, "if this is a reserve army of specialist professional labour, it's not charging a very good hourly rate".

## WHAT DOES ACADEMIC PRECARITY 'LOOK LIKE'?

Academia is precarious in a number of ways. Your employment may be subject to frequent and unpredictable changes (Zheng 2018), and contracts are short term, time dependent on the teaching demands, or the project if on a research contract. Precarious staff may not know if their contract will be renewed until a few weeks before term (University and College Union 2016). Teaching staff tend to be paid hourly, and they are often only paid for the front facing work that they do i.e. the hour that they teach, and not paid for any preparation. Precarity can also involve frequent and unpredictable changes i.e. change of hours or modules taught. They also face being dismissed—or their contracts not being renewed—for any reason—without recourse to an appeals process (Zheng 2018: 236).

> *I taught three modules last year. Then with no explanation, the next year, zero. There was no one I could speak to about this, no one I could put in a complaint to, so that was it.* [Ben, a graduate teaching assistant in Biological Sciences at a Russel Group institution]

As I will go on to discuss in the chapter, precarity can leave those without a financial safety net, subject to the threat of poverty and homelessness. This can leave some susceptible to illnesses such as anxiety and depression.

Respondents undertaking this 'flexible' form of employment reported being saddled with large classes, having a lack of access to basic facilities such as printers, and being offered little career development or pastoral support (Lyons 2015). Some, like Samantha, report being feeling like a second-class citizen:

*I had four or five short-term contracts. I had no formal induction, I was treated like the help, given more work than I was paid for, and I'm pretty sure, my supposed colleagues had no idea who I was.*

Other respondents felt marginalised from colleagues, undervalued and expendable. Some felt exploited due to the levels of unpaid labour they carried out such as writing and reviewing articles, running blogs—activities seen as central to academia, and also necessary to climb up the academic career ladder.

*I have conducted literature reviews and analysed data for a Professor, and he hinted this may turn into a permanent post.* [Paul]

Some see these tasks as the experience needed to gain permanency, Kuehn and Corrigan (2013) describe them as 'hope labour', something which keeps workers locked into precarity.

Similar to what Zheng (2018) reports, some, so utterly demoralised by this precariousness were, on the verge of leaving academia. The difficulty of managing work and having a private life was cited as the main reasons for leaving academia. David, a Lecturer in Natural Geography at a Russell Group institution talked about the realities of his working life

*I work evening and weekends, Christmas, Easter, birthdays. I travel frequently. I am single. But only because I've not had time to spend quality time with a potential partner. This is too much, so I am leaving academia in January.*

Respondents talked of how academia can be incompatible with relationships for most people, and also making motherhood difficult for many women. This is consistent with Bozzon and Murgia's (2017) findings on postdoctoral fellows working in two Italian universities. They found that women in particular found that the frequent periods working abroad and participation in conferences were obstacles to the maintenance of private relationships (p. 339). Whereas the men in Bozzon and Murgia's (2017) research, as well as my own, reported more stable relationships. I will return to the theme of work/life balance later in this chapter.

## Who are the Precariat?

The typical academic precariat is someone who works part time, is an ethnic minority, female and under the age of 40, and is employed at a post 1992 institution on a research only contract (Bryson and Barnes 2000; Standing 2011). At senior lecturer/senior research fellow level, precarious employment becomes less likely. Characteristics of my own respondents both match and differ somewhat from this. Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), is useful but it does not provide statistics according to class background. Nor does it give details relating to intersections of ones identity i.e. age and ethnicity.

### *Age*

Data from Advance HE (2018) found almost two thirds of (65 per cent) of academics aged 40 and under were on fixed-term contracts (p. 60). This is to be expected as precariousness is associated almost exclusively with young academics due to the typical understanding of the academic trajectory e.g. A Levels, onto degree, Masters study, then PhD, and after that a permanent academic post after a few years working as a Teaching Assistant/Associate. However, 28 out of the 41 respondents I spoke to who were in precarious contracts reported having a non-traditional academic trajectory e.g. starting their BA degree in their mid-late twenties, thus they had not completed their PhD until their mid-thirties. Four respondents were on fixed term contracts in their forties, something that was a worry for them.

*I'm not sure I'll ever get a permanent job.* [Amy]

Given the few opportunities for permanent employment, this may be an acute observation as precarity can now extend for one's entire 'career' (Gill 2009).

### *Gender*

Much of the existing research shows that academic precarity disproportionately affects female academics (See Zheng 2018; Courtois and O'Keefe 2019). A 2014 study by the Higher Education Authority in Ireland found that men acquire 70 percent of all permanent academic positions in all seven universities in the country (cited in Ivancheva 2015). Among my

respondents there was an even spread of both men and women on fixed term contracts, and further questioning revealed that this was the case in their institutions. We discussed gender differences in relation to academic precarity and the general consensus, from both my male and female respondents, was that classed as opposed to gender differences were more apparent. For instance, Emma and Lucy relayed their observations of how the men in their department move onto permanent contracts with apparent ease:

> *This middle-class guy, within twelve months he has gone from teaching assistant to lecturer. He's just got senior lecturer, this is by year three. All the while I've been working as a TA for 4 years.* [Emma, a teaching assistant in Health Studies at a post 1992 institution]

> *We are both Teaching Associates, same subject area, but he has been given longer contracts, the more advanced modules, little bits of research over the summer.* [Lucy, a teaching associate in Law at a Russell Group institution]

Ant, a teaching associate in Social Sciences at a Russell Group institution, saw similar stories of preferential treatment:

> *I've been there for two years. I cover the introductory modules. I understand some people are struggling to get any hours, but it's clear who will move onto becoming a lecturer or research fellow—the more traditional academics.*

I asked these respondents if their experiences could be explained in anyway by gender, but they were insistent that one's apparent class position impacted on their opportunities for progression. For instance, Sophie, a teaching assistant in Biological Sciences at a Red Brick institution argued:

> *There is no doubt that women are negatively impacted. But if you ignore the intersection of class, and ethnicity, disability etc, it may appear that women are doing well. In my institution, I can't speak for others, if you are a middle-class woman you have a good chance of competing with your male colleagues for opportunities. But if you are from my background, male or female, its limited.*

Ant, agreed somewhat with Sophie:

> *I have it easier than some women in a lot of ways, but being a blunt northerner marks me out as a lesser male.*

The work of Connell (2005) supports the latter comment and serves as a useful analytical tool to identify the practices that perpetuate classed gender inequalities. Connell (2005) cited multiple forms of masculinities besides the idealised, hegemonic masculinity. For instance, the marginalized masculinity represents a more nonconforming or 'failed' masculinity (Cheng 1999) that is associated with men of colour, men with disabilities. In academia, the marginalised masculinity also includes working class men.

### *Disability*

HESA data shows that disability disclosure rates were slightly higher among full-time academic staff on open-ended/permanent contracts compared with fixed-term contracts (3.9 per cent compared with 2.9 per cent among academic staff) (Advance HE 2018). A lower proportion of professors disclosed a disability (2.7 per cent) than non-professorial academic staff (3.8 per cent), and a smaller proportion of disabled academics were employed on senior academic contracts than academics without a disclosed disability (Advance HE n.d.). Within my cohort, five respondents, which corresponds to 6.6 per cent, had a disability. April and Ashley self-defined as being 'physically impaired', Jessie, an associate lecturer in Linguistics at a Russel Group institution, talked of having a condition which makes it difficult for her to read for long periods without experiencing nausea and headaches, Tina had a hidden disability and Brandon defined his impairment as 'severe mental health concerns'. Not all respondents disclosed this to their institution. Jessie, for instance, talked of feeling she could not afford to disclose her disability this until she was made permanent.

Dolmage (2017) says metaphorically and physically there are steep steps to the Ivory Tower, where only the truly 'fit' can survive this 'climb'" (p. 44). Accounts of structural ableism were reported by all five respondents with a disability. Tina reported difficulties in obtaining reasonable adjustments, while April and Ashley talked of inaccessible campus infrastructure. What was distressing was their opinion that their requirements were not addressed as they were not 'full staff members'.

> *They are not going to come out and say that, as the Equality Act protects people with disabilities. But for the two years that I have been a teaching associate, I have been continually timetabled in an inaccessible classroom. These issues might not be sorted as the module convenor does not have time, but considering*

*I'm her support staff, that's quite disheartening.* [Ashley, a teaching assistant in Psychology at a post 1992 institution]

For April, a lecturer in Biomedical Sciences at a traditional institution, a disability meant additional academic labour.

*The support is there for students, quite rightly of course, but I have to e-mail, phone people up, liaise and organise, just to make sure I can access the buildings where I will be teaching.*

These factors caused disproportionate levels of anxiety and stress, which were detrimental to mental health. Including disability in the conversation about precarity is vital. At present, the academic and grey literature focuses on precariously employed academics experiencing stress and anxiety *because* of working in precarious employment. It says little about those with existing disabilities who also experience stress and anxiety due to the difficuties they have while navigating academia with a disability.

The intersection of class and disability is important to understand as the sixth State of the Nation Report by the Social Mobility Commission found that disabled people from working-class backgrounds are three times less likely than non-disabled people from privileged backgrounds to be in higher-paid jobs. Impairments, health conditions and social responses to these conditions often prevented people with disabilities from working, thus depriving them of income. Disability often brings with it a series of higher and additional costs e.g. equipment essential for independence, as well as ongoing expenses such as food, clothing, utilities and recreation. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation estimated the following weekly budget was required for people with a variety of disabilities.

- £1513 for a people with high support needs;
- £389 for a people with low-medium needs;
- £1336 for hearing impairments;
- £632 for visual impairments (Smith et al. 2004)

Brandon, a teaching assistant in Health Studies at a post 1992 institution, offered an understanding of the impact of disability when on a precarious contract:

*I'm fixed term so do not 'receive sick pay'. If my mental health worsens, as it likely with my condition, then I am in financial trouble.*

According to a recent The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development report, half of the population will develop a mental illness at some point in their lives, with adverse effects on their productivity, wage, and employment opportunities (OECD 2014). This means that "*not only is there a social justice case for ridding the system of precarity, there is a business case too!*" [Daisy].

While the above situation would be typical of all precarious academics with poor mental health, those from working class backgrounds are much less likely to have the economic capital to allow them to take much needed time away from work, and as such tend to work "*through it*" as Coleen, a lecturer in Psychology/Linguistics at a traditional institution says, which makes her condition worse. Tina, a lecturer In Secondary and Post Compulsory Education at a post 1992 institution, discussed how she would work for long periods while unwell.

> *If I'm in work its presumed that I am well, but in reality, I'm normally 'half well'. There is no understanding that I might be unwell but need the money.*

This binary notion of being 'well' or 'sick' is not helpful for someone like Tina where their impairment is invisible, and there is a 'shaded area' between health and sickness (McGurk et al. 2018). Is not helpful for someone like Tina where their impairment is invisible.

### Family/Social Support

Reading through the extracts of interviews, I saw many examples of encouragement and moral support from family members, that helped to negate some of the additional barriers they faced due to having a disability within academia. For instance, Jessie said that her mum, despite not understanding subject area, would read out loud research papers that Jessie written, and make edits where she indicated. Brandon reported that if he was suffering an attack of anxiety his dad would drive him to work when he has teaching and wait around for him. These participants commented that their friends and family provided the support that the university should provide.

Respondents also reported the familial/social support they received from online support groups relating to their disability. Tina referred to being a member of a Facebooks group where members had a similar disability to her.

*The group can be a constant source of support when my MS is particularly difficult to cope with. But as most in the group are not involved in academia, I can talk freely. I have used it to talk about how class can affect my current financial situation.*

Tina used this support group to manage the difficult times she had navigating academia. Such groups can be popular with people with disabilities as online support can provide a more welcoming venue to discuss sensitive topics.

### Ethnicity

James and Valluvan (2014) identified a dangerous "mutual embrace" between racism and neoliberalism in higher education, where the 'market' has clearly had an impact on who is employed in HE. Amongst UK nationals, BME groups make up only 8 percent of Professors, while amongst non-UK Nationals, they comprised of 14 percent of Professors. White males comprised of 69 percent of Professors, whereas White females comprised of 23 percent of Professor, leaving BME males comprising of 7 percent and BME female 2 percent respectively (Advance HE 2018: 164). Due to the lack of data on social class, I'm not able to calculate how many working-class black female, or female professors we currently have.

The above statistics support Puwar's (2004) description of female BME academics as "space invaders", as their very physical presence disrupts the normalized white male spaces of the academy. Casualised contracts magnify pre-existing inequalities in the workforce, so it may be no surprise that HESA data found among both UK and non-UK academic staff, a higher proportion of BME staff were on fixed-term contracts (33 percent and 50 percent, respectively) compared to White staff (28 percent and 39 percent, respectively) (Advance HE 2018: 180). Among my own respondents, four from a BME background were on a fixed term contract. My respondents had similar experiences to that reported by Bhopal and Jackson (2013) e.g. several detected a lack of trust in them by senior colleagues. For instance, David talked of being challenged on how they had marked students' work, while Jamie, a lecturer in History at a traditional institution, felt that the finer details of her teaching was often scrutinised:

*You end up feeling paranoid that you are not as good as everyone else. I was told this was imposter syndrome but in fact, the more I look at it, it was the scrutiny I was put under as a junior academic. I feel I have to earn my place more than others.*

Similar experiences were reported by Deem et al. (2005), Wright et al. (2007) (cited in Leathwood et al. 2009), but they had no discussion on the impact of class background.

I should pause here to say when looking for research on ethnicity and class, I found very few results that focused on this intersection. I asked some BME respondents about this and they felt this was because as ethnicity, like class, is linked to disadvantages, so finding research relating to ethnicity and class and success in education would be more difficult. Returning to Jamie's experience of being over-scrutinised, she had concerns over whether this would affect her career moving forwards, and if this would affect her chances of moving from precarity to permanency. Taking research on BME academics without the intersection of class, as an example, she is right to feel this concern. Shilliam (2014) reports there is a lack of mentorship for BME academics, and these challenges begin during PhD study. Further to this, Black academics—and especially women – tend to be overlooked for promotions. Alongside this, reports of bullying and mentally debilitating racial harassment are commonplace (p. 32). Bhopal argues that despite legislation such as the Equality Act 2010, BME staff continue to experience disadvantages in higher education compared to their White colleagues (Bhopal and Jackson 2013; Pilkington 2013 cited in Bhopal 2014). For instance, BME academics reported having to reach a higher threshold for career promotion and progression when compared to their White colleagues (cited in Ibid.: 41). The epitome of the 'white privilege' that Bhopal (2018) goes onto discuss in her book of the same name.

## The Classed Nature of Precarity

While Zheng (2018) and Courtois and O'Keefe (2019) provide excellent discussions of the gendered nature of insecure contracts, I am continually surprised by how little focus there is on how social class, or socio-economic status can influence one's experience of precarity. Interviews highlighted four specific areas:

## Income Insecurity

Around one fifths of all respondents provided some form of financial support to their parents and siblings, Jeremy explains:

> *When I was at university, I sent my mum small sums of money that might help her with the weekly shop, every few weeks or if I had a little left over when my grant came through.*

Half of those who talked about supporting their parents, partner or a sibling were on precarious contracts.

> *I am still looking for a permanent job and I worry, I worry everyday as I have to keep going with my rent as I have to support my boyfriend. I send money home to my sister, she has a little girl, my mum, she has mental health problems. I have responsibilities so it makes the precarity worse.* [Clara, a lecturer in Geography at a red brick institution]

Respondents would also be concerned when they were coming to the end of the contract or academic term.

> *I've got £40 and it has to last me for the next two weeks. Hopefully I will get a further research assistant contract.* [Elaine, a researcher in Social Sciences at a post 1992 institution]

Elaine said she didn't not know when she would hear about the contract, she thought it would likely be at the last minute. By this stage, she, like many others, would be in debt. For a number of academics, I interviewed this meant they were considering leaving academia. Jack and Robert separately mentioned that it was impossible to live on the short term, low pay they were receiving for undergraduate teaching. Robert in particular, a teaching associate in Business Studies at a Post 1992 institution, was so short of money on the day I interviewed him, he had been given food by his friends. For both respondents it was apparent that they would have to make some tough decisions about their futures at the end of the semester.

> *If I don't manage to get some additional work, such as being a research assistant for a few months I'm going to give up my PhD for the foreseeable future,*

*and have to claim UC*[1]. [Jack, a teaching associate in Mathematics at an Oxbridge institution]

This decision is made all the more difficult as Standing (2011) notes that there are precarity traps such as the long delays between becoming eligible to receive employment benefits and starting to receive them. Thus, it would be difficult for any respondent to claim a benefit such as Universal Credit, and then take a short-term role in academia. Issues that are not a concern for someone with an economic safety net.

Economic exploitation was a key theme in my interviews with precarious academic staff, particularly amongst female academics in Russell Groups institutions. Elaine talked of being given an admin role, normally undertaken by permanent staff:

*Every other weekend there is an Open Day, and I am asked to come in represent my subject. They clearly need me, there is a job there for me, but I have been on casual, hourly pay for three years despite doing the work of an admissions officer.*

Deb, who also had a key admin role within the school despite being on a temporary contract, talked to me about being "*over worked and underpaid*". Her head of school told her to consider how privileged she was to be given such a key admin role so early in her career. She felt she was being exploited.

I have spoken to academic colleagues about this, some mentioned that this was the "way it is, the way it has always been". But this was at a time when those who were looking to become academics were most likely from wealthier backgrounds. Today's ECRs, some of whom are from distinctly less advantaged financial backgrounds, are in a catch 22 situation: they need experience to continue as academics, but this experience was expected to be gained at their own expense.

*This PhD [and MA] came with a tuition fee waiver, so it cost me nothing, but in order to keep my kids fed and housed I had to work full time.* [Liam, a lecturer in Social Policy at a post 1992 institution]

This particular respondent represented the classed nature of precarity contracts as he needed to combine his PhD, with teaching, alongside whatever work was available within his institution. When I listen to Liam's story, and that of Amy, who is working three part time jobs while doing

PhD, just to keep her head above water, and many others without financial security, I can't help but contrast their experiences with academics with financial security. Clara explains this well:

> *My friends chilled out, recovered [after doing their PhD], whilst I was like shit what am I going to do?…. I could hold out for another year, two years if I was from another background. I don't resent this at all but I could get my books out, a couple more papers and go for an Oxford lectureship, but because I need to have something now, I am calling up [unnamed university], asking if you still have work for me. So, yeah, it changes your opportunities.*

Analysing the data and it was clear that respondents were only able to sustain their current levels of precarious employment if their partner was earning a high income. Others were "*one month or so away from calling it quits*" [Jack].

### *Work/Life Balance*

Being an academic is generally characterized by high autonomy and comparative levels of flexibility. Despite this, a global study by *Times Higher Education* in 2018 surveyed the views on university staff in relation to the work-life balance. Almost 3000 higher education staff—of whom 85 per cent are academics and 67 per cent are female—said that their workload affected their ability to balance their careers with their personal lives (Bothwell 2018). Typical examples from my own interviewees of poor work-life balance included: working too many hours, constantly checking work emails and a poor social life. Respondents with partners in academia complained that cashing timetables meant that during term-time they hardly saw each other as there were little boundaries between work and home. Some acknowledged they could take time off together, and that they had an 'understanding' when times were especially busy:

> *If I'm writing he will look after the children or take them somewhere so I can concentrate.* [Dee, a researcher in Economics for a traditional institution]

But for those whose partners were not in academia, or in professional employment, it was very difficult. Respondents talked of sitting in another room reading or working weekends to finish research papers. As Jeremy says:

*These are weekends that should be spent with family, but I need to write these papers in order to get a permanent job. This is hard for someone to take who doesn't work in academia.*

*People just focus on academics with families, but it's tough for couples. I want to spend time with my wife, I miss her. But I also need to be made permanent, so I have to publish.* [Amy]

These respondents felt it was much more difficult for them because as their partners did not understand how academia worked, this time away from the family caused a huge strain. So much so, that two respondents said that their relationships were strained beyond repair:

*My relationship is at a crossroads. My wife has had enough. I work long hours, travel excessively, it's not conducive to a healthy relationship.* [Steven, a senior lecturer in History at a red brick institution]

*We have arguments over my job. It's at the stage where I will have to choose between a job and a relationship. You can't sustain a relationship when you are hoping the person will hurry up what they are saying because you have to work.* [James, a senior lecturer in Health Studies at a red brick institution]

Respondents on precarious contracts were more likely than other respondents to have considered leaving the HE sector as they could not see the benefits of the work they did, and they could not demonstrate benefits to their family. As Lucy says:

*What do I have to show? We are short of money, I'm tired and don't have time for my partner.*

### *Ill-health*

Carrying on from matters discussed in the previous section, Gill (2009) talks of the 'hidden injuries' of contractual insecurity where precarity is not just an economic problem, it is a major public health issue. Academics in her study reported chronic stress, anxiety, exhaustion, insomnia and spiralling rates of physical and mental illness (Gill and Donaghue 2016: 91). A survey by Gorczynski et al. (2017) found that 43 percent of academic staff exhibited symptoms of at least a mild mental disorder. This is nearly twice the level of the general population. These were also key

discussion points amongst my respondents, with over three quarters (n. 17) saying their mental health had been affected by working on an insecure contract as well as other stress factors such as increased workloads and the need to publish and obtain external revenue. Acker and Armenti (2004) who researched mothers building an academic career, found that their respondents reported stress, exhaustion, and sleeplessness. All five of the female respondents I spoke to whose partners were not in academia, reported a similar experience. As April says: "*I'm exhausted, constantly anxious and can't sleep*".

Respondents referred to a variety of physical problems such as headaches, weight gain/loss, acne, digestive issues, as well as constant aches and pains. Anecdotal reports suggest that academia has a high prevalence of people with eating disorders. The recent Universities UK #stepchange mental health in higher education policy says mental health should be a strategic priority as student suicide numbers are rising. Higher education institutions have a duty of care to safeguard students and this has had a positive impact on student retention/engagement. Freedom of information requests from the Guardian newspaper revealed that counselling services were inundated with academics, referrals having risen by three-quarters between 2009 and 2015. At one university, staff engagement with counselling services increased by 300 per cent over a six-year period up to 2015 (Weale 2019).

Structural issues, like excessive workloads and responsibilities, line management and workplace surveillance (Weale 2019) are often cited as being problematic, but for my interviewees, a lack of a financial support network meant that academic precarity, for the working class academic, brings additional stress. This is a collection of the experiences reported:

- *"No sickness pay nor annual leave"* [Amy]
- *"You better hope no relative is seriously ill, or that you don't get ill, or become disabled, or actually are disabled"* [Jeremy].
- *"Your cultural capital remains stagnant as you won't have institutional access when you are between jobs. There is little scope for personal development as your time is taken up with preparation for teaching or working additional hours on the project that will lead to a research position that never materialises"* [Deb].
- *"Funding for conferences is nigh impossible and if you can't afford to pay for it, you don't develop that all important social capital"* [Mark].

- *"The teaching year ends, or the project is completed and you are left high and dry"* [Hannah].
- *"You are promised 'lead author' but your work doesn't belong to you so you become one author of many on a paper that you wrote. If you are 'lucky' it all starts again"* [Unity].

## PRECARITY AND ATTENDING CONFERENCES

Conferences are an integral part of being an academic. They are the place to present existing research, or to discuss new idea with your peers (building professional capital), to understand the latest developments in your academic field (building cultural capital) and to meet new scholars to collaborate with on papers or projects (building social capital). Interactive workshops are a further benefit of conference attendance as they enable delegates to learn new skills (Harrison 2010).

### The Need for Economic Capital

But attending conferences costs money, and to attend these conferences, you need substantial economic capital as a typical multi-day conference can cost in the region of £500, and with other associated costs such as accommodation, travel and sustenance, this can bring the total costs to at least £1000. Conferences operate on the understanding that academics can finance their attendance via the economic capital academics have through the institutional funding one might have with a permanent academic post or a funded project. As outlined here, this is clearly problematic:

> *I do get reimbursed but the initial outlay of booking a conference is something that puts me in financial hardship.* [Mary: PhD student in Economics at a post 1992 institution]

> *"Your supervisor says: There's this great thing coming up that you should attend. It's going to be crucial", "Oh yeah, absolutely". "It's going to cost you 250 pounds". I don't have 250 pounds, I don't have 50 pounds, I don't have rent for this month".*

This quotation from Seb encapsulates why for people from working class backgrounds there is no Ivory Tower. While my respondents, both fixed term and permanent, spoke of the considerable barriers they faced

participating in conferences, a key part of academic life, those on fixed term contracts were clearly more disadvantaged due to their academic precarity. Respondents such as Emma, and Jade attempted to navigate these barriers by only going to one day conferences that were free or had a small fee. But these were few and far between. Respondents who lived in London, or close to big cities were able to cite many events that they attended, but those living in Scotland, Ireland or Wales were not as lucky as the headquarters of most academic associations were situated in England, mainly in London.

### Conference Grants

A typical conference call will advertise grants that may provide either a full, or partially subsidised registration fee, And/or accommodation, travel expenses. These are competitive grants, and not limited to academics from working class backgrounds. The criteria differs, but tend to require that the applicant:

1. Is a member of the society/association;
2. Is a PhD or an ECR with less than 3 year's experience;
3. provides a contribution to the conference: e.g. the applicant has had an abstract accepted for presentation as a paper in the conference programme;
4. explains how conference participation will contribute to their professional development.

Applications are then reviewed by the conference panel, judged on the scholarly quality of the applicants' submissions and their CVs. But becoming a member of an association is unlikely to be a priority, for someone on a precarious income.

> *I thought you applied for the funding and you get it if there was enough money left. I realised, too late for when I was an ECR, that conference organisers also expect the applicant to bring some form of value for money. Despite being an ECR who might have little on your academic CV, you need to 'sell' your credentials.* [Jeremy]

Respondents talked of not having the same feel of the game compared to those from an economically and social advantaged background. Jamie comments:

*Those with bourgeois values and income will instinctively know what to say in their application.*

Unless award selection committees are diverse, unconscious bias or assumptions can unintentionally influence judgment (Equality Challenge Unit 2013), and favour in-group candidates that belong to their own academic network (Zinovyeva and Bagues 2010). As the conference panel is likely to reflect the socio-economic demographics of academia e.g. middle class or elite academics, they may be more inclined to favour applicants from these backgrounds. Some ECRs set up smaller academic groups within professional societies, and as a result, may get a free place at a conference. This is an activity that is expected to be on an academic CV. But again, this expectation is problematic for academics without economic capital, or on a precarious contract as ECRs are expected to also co-organise and help facilitate these conferences for free. And as a friend reminded me, not only do you provide this labour for free, you also need to make sure your subscription is paid for otherwise you will be charged the subscription fee to arrange a conference! Of further interest was those respondents who said they could not work for free in this way, as they were already working to supplement the small income they received from teaching. As facilitating conferences are a chance for ECRs to network, it is obvious that some respondents will not be able to take advantage of this networking 'opportunity'.

### *Reimbursement Culture*

If my respondents were fortunate enough to be funded by their institution, they were often required to find the costs upfront. Emma talked of realising that her combined travel and accommodation costs for two conference would be around £1500.

*Luckily, I can cover these costs through a combination of internal funding from my department (a £500 research grant and £250 conference grant) and an external award. However, none of this money will become available to me until I provide receipts for my expenses, after I've already paid the costs upfront and can 'reimburse myself'.*

Coleen recounts a similar experience.

*The conference fees, hotel, food, not even taking in account the air fare from Dublin to London comes to £1,200. Although I have got a travel bursary and institutional funding that will give me £800 towards it, so I'm £400 'down'. But I have to pay for everything up front. Then wait around 6–8 weeks to be reimbursed. Alongside this my supervisor wants me to go to a research methods summer school that costs £1,500. I got turned down for a grant for that, but my supervisors insist I go as it will help with my research. I'm dreading, absolutely dreading telling her I can't afford to go as she's not approachable and has no idea about money.*

This general reimbursement culture is another demonstration of the eliteness of academia, even for those fortunate enough to have institutional or external funding. Later in this book I discuss how a number of respondents managed to navigate and resist precarity. The next chapter focus on some of the negative encounters respondents have experienced in academia.

## Note

1. Universal credit—a monthly payment to help with living costs when on a low income or out of work.

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