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'More to prove and more to lose': race, racism and precarious employment in higher education

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ABSTRACT

Precarious employment is considered a social determinant impacting the health of workers, families and communities. The Academy is known to utilise non-standard employment contracts, coming under widespread criticism from its social partners for exploitative practices. Whilst there is much research suggesting certain groups (e.g. early career researchers, women) are disproportionately affected, less is known about the impact of precarious employment on staff of colour. Utilising a critical race theory framework, the current study attempts to close this knowledge gap by exploring the experiences of staff of colour. Eighteen participants across 10 universities engaged in focus groups, revealing three key themes: systemic racism, job insecurity and lack of career progression. Whilst results supported existing research, limitations of the current study are discussed. Recommendations for future practice include a call for legislators and policymakers to create clearer definitions and to better standardise rights and benefits across standard and non-standard employment practices.

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Introduction

The contribution of precarious contracts to the labour market makes them of both interest and concern to policymakers, hence the rapidly growing area of research over the past few decades (e.g. Grimshaw et al. 2016; Quinlan, Mayhew, and Bohle 2001). Precarious¹ employment, which refers to temporary or 'non-standard' employment (e.g. Kalleberg and Vallas 2018), has risen significantly in this time and does so in particular around economic crisis points, the latest of which includes the COVID-19 pandemic. In Britain during the first year of the pandemic an estimated one in ten were working in the 'gig economy', working on short-term or freelance contracts rather than as permanent employees (Trade Unions Congress 2020). Yet this pattern of normalisation does not bring evidence for its continuation; the increase of insecure employment coincides with rising poverty amongst those in work (Centre for Progressive Policy 2020). Indeed underemployment, as is the case with zero-hour contracts and other unstable forms of employment, are identified by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation as a driver of rising levels of in-work poverty and indicate that current

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employment models are not working (Innes 2020). As such, concerns remain among many social partners that precarious contracts reinforce vulnerability and subsequent exploitation, thereby imposing widespread challenges on the way individuals experience the labour market. Given associations between such contracts and job insecurity, lower pay and exclusion from welfare rights and employment protection laws (McKay et al. 2012), it is perhaps unsurprising that the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain (IWGB) launched a suit against the UK government for its failure to protect millions of precarious workers during the pandemic. For many workers, these contracts are not a lifestyle choice but a forced hand (Citizens UK 2019).

There are negative implications of such high levels of precarious employment for society and the economy. The Centre for Progressive Policy (2019) notes that precarious employment is undermining Britain's ability to rebalance geographical regions and 'level up' the economy (Johnson 2021), whilst international research suggests that the never-ending carousel of fixed-term contracts may lead to a bill that society will later have to pay for (McKay et al. 2012), such as state benefits and pensions. The associated lack of social security protections afforded by such contracts, such as reduced productivity and employee health, ultimately increase societal costs (Erlinghagen 2007). It is thus also a public health issue, with physical and mental health outcomes demonstrably worse when compared to the 'gold standard'; that is to say, employment that is secure, full-time, year-round, well-compensated and socially protected (Benach et al. 2014). Benach et al. (2014) suggest that temporary workers, who more frequently report worse working conditions, are in an objective state of job insecurity. Evidence largely points to this as the subjective experience of these workers too; in Britain, longitudinal studies have linked job insecurity to declines in psychological and physical health, such as increased blood pressure and body mass index (Ferrie et al. 1998, 2008; Ferrie 1999), as well as presenteeism (Ferrie 2001). Meanwhile, across Europe precarious employment is considered a key social determinant of health (Benach et al. 2014) and an employment condition affecting the health of workers, families and communities (Benach and Muntaner 2011; Benach et al. 2007). In Britain, 40% of workers experiencing job insecurity are parents (Living Wage Foundation 2019), many of whom report experiencing stress, overwork, bullying and exploitation (Citizens UK 2019). The latter study also revealed that parents had difficulties with childcare and that workers on zero-hour contracts felt that hours and shift patterns were 'weaponised' against them and their colleagues. Some could not afford to call in sick, while others had no holiday for years, both of which negatively impacted productivity. The issue of precarious employment is therefore an individual, familial, communal and societal problem.

Recognising the impact of precarious employment on various societal institutions, this article attempts to explore the impact of the 'gig economy' in higher education, with a particular focus on the impact upon staff of colour within the Academy. The study draws on critical race theory (CRT) and a thematic analysis methodological approach to illuminate experiences of staff of colour encountering precarious employment. Importantly, the article will argue that systemic racism plays an integral part in existing cultures of dehumanisation and exploitation within the Academy. Exploration of the uncertainty of non-standard employment within this article centres factors such as job security, career progression and mental health as factors that are all compromised through job precarity. The study emanates from the marginalised voices of 18 Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic members of staff on

precarious contracts within the higher education sector, across the Russell Group and post-92 institutions. Exploring the need for the eradication of precarity serves as an important vehicle for not only promoting egalitarianism but also eliminating exploitation within the labour market, particularly the higher education sector.

Critical race theory

CRT is a theoretical framework that examines the role of race, racism and power (e.g. Delgado and Stefancic 2012). With its roots in legal studies and radical feminism, a founding tenet of CRT is in its commitment to eliminate all forms of oppression (Dixson and Rousseau 2005) through an interdisciplinary approach (Solórzano 1997). Solórzano and Yosso define CRT in education as:

a framework or set of basic insights, perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that seeks to identify, analyse and transform those structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions. (2002, 25)

Theoretic elements of CRT include the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism; race as a social construct (Collins 2004); whiteness as property (Harris 1993); the challenge to dominant ideology; and the value of experiential knowledge (Solórzano 1997). The first, centrality of race, is about the permanence of racism (Bell 1992) and how it is so embedded within society that it is difficult to recognise and hard to address (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995). It should therefore be foregrounded in research (Solórzano and Yosso 2002). This includes intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991), acknowledging how the centrality of racism is impacted by other inter-related identities and social structures, such as gender, sexuality and class (Collins 1998). The second element, social construction, means race is not inherent within itself or a person, but is a complex and long-standing product of society (Collins 2004). Third, whiteness as property, refers to the value whiteness holds in relation to other races (Mensah and Jackson 2018). Historically, this was in the context of property and rights, but over time has become associated with other abstract concepts such as time, creativity or education (Harris 1993). The fourth, challenge, means countering dominant narratives around neutrality, objectivity, colour-blindness and meritocracy in society, all of which maintain the value of whiteness. One way in which to challenge these ‘majoritarian stories’² is through a fifth element, experiential knowledge. CRT research values the lived experiences and narratives of minoritised communities; that is, counter-storytelling (Delgado and Stefancic 2012). Three ‘tools’ of CRT (Zamudio et al. 2011) in particular – whiteness as property (Harris 1995), intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991) and counter-storytelling (Solórzano and Yosso 2002) – are central to understanding how staff of colour experience precarious contracts.

Precarious contracts in higher education

One of the social partners taking keen interest in precarious work is the University and College Union (UCU). Their recent report suggests that one-third of all academics working in academia are employed on fixed-term contracts, which rises to almost half for teaching-only academics and over two-thirds for research-only staff (UCU 2021).

Meanwhile, 30% of higher education institutions use zero-hour contracts for employing academic staff, despite negative press and widespread campaigns to discredit them. Many staff, particularly in teaching-only roles (42%), are paid by the hour, and a total of 68,848 academic staff are on some form of casualised contract. The use of fixed-term and other precarious contracts among academic staff groups therefore remains endemic. Similarly to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Innes 2020), the UCU highlights that the current business model is not working and that casualisation must be addressed. However, the lack of clarity about definitions, rights and terms of employment, which reinforces the sense of insecurity among staff populations (Lopes and Dewan 2015), can itself make reform a challenge.

The impact of such instability on the academic workforce corresponds with the broader literature surrounding precarious employment, including financial and health implications. In research by the UCU of its members (UCU 2016b), 17% struggled to pay for food, one-third (36%) struggled to pay rent or mortgage repayments and almost one in four struggled to pay household bills such as fuel electricity, water and repairs. For those staff who are parents, the impact occurs at child and family levels, reflecting concerns from the Centre for Progressive Policy (2020) and Citizens UK (2019). The UCU (2016b) surmise that the single greatest factor that united experiences of all staff on insecure contracts was the anxiety and inability to build careers or life plans that more secure employment can provide. This was a feature of research by Lopes and Dewan (2015), whose participants described emotional and practical consequences of precarious work. The academic staff involved reported being underpaid, overworked, pressured and unable to plan for their immediate or long-term futures, and feelings of exploitation. Lopes and Dewan documented a sense of these staff living in perpetual hope and uncertainty, alongside experiences of stress (e.g. being at 'breaking point' [2015, 34]), decreased self-confidence and a growing negative attitude towards securing permanent employment. This was replicated in a study from Allmer (2018), whose research participants described feeling depressed and devalued whilst struggling with self-esteem and poor concentration. They also felt that they could not say 'no'. That precarious employment was deemed a rite of passage (Lopes and Dewan 2015) suggests that, for some academic staff, exploitation is not met with resistance and thus universities can continue to profit from it. This was also evident when teaching staff reported attempting to protect and shield their students from the negative impact of their insufficiently contracted hours, by working additional hours without payment or recognition (Lopes and Dewan 2015).

Whilst these findings implicate many higher education institutions within the UK, the UCU noted that Russell Group institutions were 'the worst offenders' (2016a, 4). According to their analysis of Higher Education Statistics Agency data, 59% of staff in the Russell Group are on fixed-term or casualised contracts, compared with 45% of staff at post-92 universities (UCU 2016a). This suggests that elitism may be a factor serving to reinforce patterns of precarious employment. That said, of the factors relating to trends in precarious work contracts, it is key protected characteristics that are most prevalent in research. Kalleberg and Vallas (2018) describe correlations between precarity and age, gender and race, and the broader evidence base clearly points to women being more negatively impacted than their male counterparts (e.g. European Parliament 2020). It is therefore these factors where reform should most likely be needed.

Precarious contracts and areas of inequality

There are key differences in patterns across the protected characteristics within higher education institutions, which reflect findings from the wider evidence base. For example, analysis of 2019/20 Higher Education Statistics Agency data suggests that more than one-third (36%) of women are on fixed-term contracts compared with under one-third (32%) of men (UCU 2021). Qualitative studies exploring gender have revealed specific challenges discussed by female academic and professional staff, such as single parenthood (Allmer 2018) or childcare concerns (Citizens UK 2019). O’Keefe and Courtois (2019) suggest that single childless women do not necessarily fare much better, referring to these women as providing ‘the housework of the academy’ through the nurturing and caring roles they are expected to undertake as part of their work. This precarisation of academic labour affects them at all positions, although O’Keefe and Courtois (2019) note that the higher up in the ranks, the fewer women there are. Similar to earlier references to a perpetual cycle of hope and uncertainty (Lopes and Dewan 2015), Courtois and O’Keefe (2015) document the ‘hamster wheel of precarity’ among female academic staff, with the division of labour often differing between males and females. Men then go on to profit from this exploitation of labour, while females struggle even to retain their precarious jobs (Wilson et al. 2010).

Of all the protected characteristics, gender thus appears most in the literature surrounding precarious employment. Conversely, there is a paucity of research exploring race. For example, Lopes and Dewan (2015) note that their research cohort is predominantly female, but also that almost all were white. They also reflect on the challenges of securing disaggregated data that allow for such interrogation; no data were available from the Higher Education Statistics Agency regarding race. Nevertheless, recent UCU analysis of available data makes clear the issue; the number of Black academic staff on zero-hour contracts is double the number of white academics, while the number of white and Black academic staff on hourly paid contracts is 13% and 18%, respectively (UCU 2021). When considering intersectional variables, these numbers are even more concerning; 28% of white male academic staff are on fixed-term contracts, compared with 45% of Asian females (UCU 2021). Clearly, whilst there is a need to consider gender, there is also a need to consider race when exploring patterns of inequality in precarious employment. As such, intersectionality is a central tenet of the current study.

Precarious contracts and race inequality

On a broad scale, Kalleberg and Vallas (2018) call for more research that pays attention to the ways in which social inequalities such as race impinge on current employment systems. Standard work arrangements have historically been reserved for white people and men (Kalleberg and Vallas 2018). As Resmaa Menakem writes, white supremacy is the view that ‘whites as the norm or *standard* for human, and people of colour are the deviation from that norm’ (2017, xxv; original emphasis). With this in mind, the high number of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic staff on non-standard work arrangements compared to the number of white academic staff accessing the ‘gold standard’ of secure, full-time, permanent employment (Benach et al. 2014) can be seen as a reinforcement of white supremacy and the systematic dehumanisation of people of colour. The limited access to standard work arrangements for ethnic minority staff echoes the concept of whiteness as property; in

essence, ‘the fundamental precept of whiteness – the core of its value – is its exclusivity’ (Harris 1993, 1789). The current business models outlined by the UCU (2020) and Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Innes 2020) serve a function to disadvantage those on precarious contracts, whose labour serves the institutions and senior leaders in permanent roles whilst still being considered disposable/dispensable. Given the role of power in these arrangements (e.g. Kalleberg and Vallas 2018), and that a significant number of staff on precarious contracts are ethnic minorities, of which many are also female (UCU 2020), more research into racial inequality and intersectionality (e.g. Crenshaw 1989) is required.

It is the aim of this research to answer the call from Kalleberg and Vallas (2018), Lopes and Dewan (2015) and others who have recommended further research into the relationships between race, gender and precarious contracts. Kalleberg and Vallas (2018) specifically note that aggregating data can mask important trends affecting different subpopulations, highlighting the need for research that explores individual experiences of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic staff on casualised contracts. Moreover, given that socio-economic characteristics such as ethnic minority status may interact with attributes of precariousness to produce differential health effects (Benach et al. 2014), deep exploration of these factors through qualitative inquiry is needed to answer the question emerging from the literature. Implementing CRT as a research methodology allows the foregrounding of race and racism in the study (Solórzano and Yosso 2002), which as yet has not been the case within existing research. The purpose of this study is therefore to unpack the individual experiences of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic staff affected by precarious employment, utilising counter-storytelling as a tool to challenge current dominant discourse and thus inform future reform.

Research question

In order to both redress the gap in literature and centre the lived experiences of staff of colour on precarious contracts, this study aims to examine the following question: what are the experiences of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic staff working on non-standard/precarious contracts within higher education institutions?

Methodology

Participants

The study involved 10 UK-based universities, including Russell Group and post-92 institutions. Convenience sampling was used to recruit participants, which was facilitated through networks and recommendations among staff of colour working within the sector.

The recruited participants were staff of colour ($N=18$) aged between 27 and 52 years, who were in a range of academic ($n=13$, 72%) and professional services ($n=5$, 28%) roles. Participants identified as Black/Black British ($n=8$, 44%), Mixed Heritage ($n=4$, 22%), Asian/Asian British ($n=3$, 17%) and Latin-American ($n=3$, 17%). Of the participants, 13 (72%) were female and five (28%) were male. The majority of participants were on precarious contracts (hourly contracts) at the time of the study, with others on fixed-term contracts of 18–24 months.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, with deductive methods of inquiry (Clarke & Braun 2017). A deductive approach is useful for centring a particular aspect of the data or a specific finding that could best be illuminated or understood in the context of an existing theory or frame (Kiger and Varpio 2020). In the current study the analytic process was informed by a CRT framework, which recognises society as being fundamentally stratified along racial lines (Hylton 2012). Conducted in this way, thematic analysis seeks to theorise the sociocultural contexts and structural conditions that underpin individual accounts (Kiger and Varpio 2020), such as social constructionism, whiteness as property and the centrality of race (e.g. Collins 2004; Harris 1995; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995). Within a CRT framework, thematic analysis can:

allow the researcher to study the power relations informing reality and to engage in emancipatory investigations that value the voices of the oppressed populations. (Kiger and Varpio 2020, 2)

To address these deeper, more underlying meanings, assumptions and ideologies within the data, thematic analysis focused on 'latent' (i.e. interpretative) themes (Clarke & Braun 2017). Following data familiarisation, a coding frame was developed, and key themes were identified. During the data review process, new themes and sub-themes emerged and were adapted in an iterative process. The research design and analytic process were invariably shaped by the researcher's disciplinary knowledge and epistemology (Braun and Clarke 2012) and their positionality (Parker and Lynn 2002).

Researcher

In terms of positionality, the researcher identifies as a Black male academic with experience of being on several precarious contracts while working in higher education, although when conducting the research was on a standard, permanent open-ended employment contract. Their positioning not only provided practical and theoretical understanding of the context explored, but also personal understanding. These experiences were disorientating and anxiety-evoking, particularly given that they were unforeseen and brought with them both individual and familial implications.

While holding 'insider' status through these experiences and characteristics, the researcher also held 'outsider' status with respect to gender and role (i.e. professional services). These can alter and inform the research process (Bhopal 2010; Phoenix 1994) and each bring benefits and limitations to qualitative research.

For certain methods of qualitative inquiry, the researcher might be expected to be seen to mitigate their inevitable subjectivity and researcher bias (e.g. through 'bracketing'). However, CRT values the power of storytelling (Delgado and Stefancic 2012) and critical race theorists recognise how identities shape research. As Ladson-Billings states, 'my research is part of my life and my life is part of my research' (2003, 417). The role of a reflexive researcher (Young 2004) thus becomes especially important, and one the researcher attempted to maintain throughout the current study.

Procedure

Each participant completed anonymous, self-administered questionnaires which were submitted virtually to the researcher. This initial stage was to capture monitoring information (ethnicity, gender, age, level of education, marital status and duration of time in higher education) but also included space for comments about their experiences of racism, the content of which informed the development of focus group and interview schedules. All questionnaires submitted documented at least one experience of racism linked to their employment and/or career status.

Participants then engaged in individual, semi-structured interviews and unstructured focus groups to further explore their lived experiences of racism and of navigating the precariat in higher education. The reported results draw primarily on excerpts from the two focus group discussions, each of which lasted for around two hours. All participant voices are therefore included in the findings.

The objectives of the study were explained to the participants and informed consent was obtained. Discussions were facilitated by the researcher and all focus group sessions and interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. In addition to the recorded discussions, written notes were also taken and flipcharts were utilised for participants to document patterns of thought regarding their experiences of precarious work as an academic or professional member of staff. This facilitated a reflexive process, which ensured participants' views were clearly documented. Each participant was encouraged to speak and express their own views. The supportive and nurturing environment cultivated candid conversations among participants about their experiences of racism and traversing the 'gig economy' in higher education, which enriched the disclosure process.

A topic/discussion guide with questions developed and led by the researcher was used to ascertain various aspects regarding the instability and emotional toll of being on precarious contracts and the impact that this had on career trajectory. It is recognised that the research question(s) can have as much impact on the research as social location does (e.g. Brannen 1993). CRT was used conceptually to guide the structure of the interview schedules, although these were flexible enough to allow participants to tell their stories:

1. What has/have been your experience(s) of working on precarious contracts?
2. What role has race/racism played in your experience(s) of working on precarious contracts?
3. What has been the impact of precarious work on your career progression and trajectory?
4. What other impacts (if any) of precarious work have you experienced?
5. What differences (if any) have you experienced compared to your white counterparts?

Findings and discussion

Three themes were identified through analysis. From the first theme, systemic racism, three sub-themes emerged: exploitation, dehumanisation and gendered racism. For the second theme, job insecurity, four sub-themes emerged: financial insecurity, lack of work-life balance, mental health and transience. A third theme identified was lack of career progression. Themes and sub-themes are depicted in [Figure 1](#), and are discussed against the existing research landscape in the following.

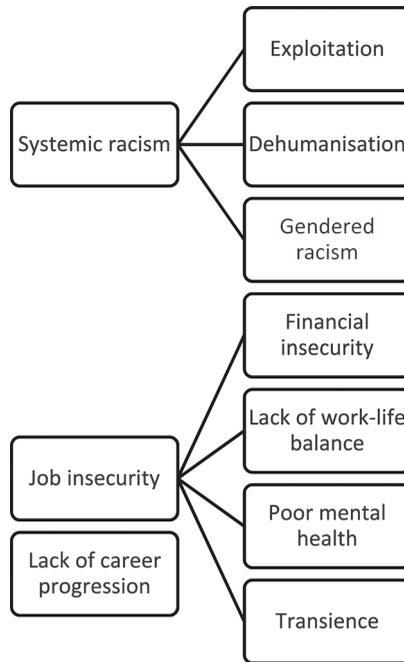


Figure 1. Themes and sub-themes from data analysis.

Theme 1 (T1): systemic racism

Systemic racism was a strong theme across all participants, with staff of colour attributing feelings of exploitation and dehumanisation to racial injustice. Importantly, this suggests that, for staff of colour working in the Academy, the precarious nature of non-standard employment is experienced as a form of institutional racism. This theme speaks to both the centrality of racism and whiteness as property, the latter a construct frequently reproduced due to whiteness being framed as normative (Cabrera 2014). It also speaks to an unwillingness to name the contours of racism (Leonardo 2002) and how they influence employment practices within the academy.

I've been pretty much at the same pay grade for 7 years ... my white colleagues all have permanent positions having been on fixed-term contracts for 2 years. It's sad to say but racism underpins almost everything when you are a person of colour. (P11, Black female, academic)

T1 sub-theme 1: exploitation

Within systemic racism, a sub-theme emerged regarding how staff of colour felt exploited by the institutions by whom they were employed. The sense that institutions, and those individuals at the top, profit from the labour of their ethnic minority workforce was discussed by many participants, including participant eight:

Being on temporary contracts is one of the best ways of keeping us Black people in the academy on the plantation. We have to work, but we don't have as many rights. (P8, Black male, academic)

For staff of colour such as participant eight, there was a historical, pervasive and potentially traumatic component to their experiences. This was further exemplified in another comment, which described the implicit expectations that staff of colour undertake the work with little remuneration or recognition of time or effort:

As usual, the labour sits with us. It doesn't matter where you go, it's the same everywhere. I don't think they even know they're doing it. It's just like 'hey, [name redacted], we need this lecture covered'. But it's never just a lecture – it's the preparation, the marking, the queries from students. They play it down so it seems like no big deal, but who's the one staying late making sure everything gets done? And not even getting paid for all the extra hours? (P2, Mixed Heritage female, academic)

Participants further highlighted the implicit expectations that staff of colour do more work, suggesting it is perceived by their institution as the norm and thereby reinforcing the centrality of racism (Leonardo 2002):

Everyone goes on like it's normal – like it's just the done thing. But when you actually look at it, we're doing way too much. I don't see them doing this to each other. (P11, Asian female, professional services)

This is consistent with Lopes and Dewan (2015), who also identified exploitation as a theme in their research. However, in the current study, experiences of exploitation were directly connected to experiences of racism. This speaks to the body of research highlighting disproportionality among workers of colour, such as that Black workers are twice as likely as white workers to be in temporary and zero-hour employment (TUC, 2017).

There are long-standing empirical links between labour exploitation and racism (e.g. O'Hearn and Ciccantell 2021). Although of course not acknowledged as such, exploitation is interwoven into university structures as their business models depend on it. There is therefore an unspoken acceptance of and thus complicity in exploitative practices occurring within higher education.

T1 sub-theme 2: dehumanisation

Within systemic racism, a second sub-theme emerged around the dehumanising nature of precarious work and how staff of colour felt devalued. In comments from staff of colour, the often-featuring distinction between 'them' and 'us' was used interchangeably to refer to either the staff group (i.e. white staff versus staff of colour) or hierarchy (i.e. leaders versus workforce). It became clear from the findings that the two were often over-coupled (i.e. white staff with leadership and staff of colour with workforce), further reinforcing notions of the 'snowy peaks' of academia (Runnymede Trust 2010):

It makes you feel like shit, like no one sees your worth. You can work all the hours God sends, and you still won't be good enough for them. They just don't see you as being on their level. (P16, Black female, academic)

Participants of colour described feeling like 'second-class citizens' and 'disposable' to those they were working for, suggesting that they were viewed as a resource or commodity (i.e. to be used and objectified) rather than as a valued person and equal:

I'm on this contract that'll run out, and then it'll be onto the next one. Never permanent, cause they obviously think I'm replaceable. So when they're done with me, that'll be it. It's like, do you even see me as a viable contender? Or am I just this disposable thing that you can find more of where that came from? (P5, Mixed Heritage male, academic)

Being on a sessional contract is demoralising, you are kind of treated like a second-class citizen and you become aware very quickly that not only do institutions have no duty of care to you, but you are easily replaceable cause of the demand for jobs. You're just so dispensable. (P6, Black male, academic)

T1 sub-theme 3: gendered racism

Within systemic racism, the intersecting impact of gender emerged in a third sub-theme, gendered racism. Many female participants of colour recounted experiences of exploitation and dehumanisation, as well as an acute awareness of their position, or 'rank'. White people, often male, have a history of instituting and maintaining hierarchies to rank themselves at the top³, and are a long-standing tenet of both whiteness and patriarchy (e.g. Torres and Pace 2005). It is perhaps unsurprising that female staff of colour did not feel they were seen as equivalent:

We are being horribly exploited. The ones at the top ... they stand on our shoulders, cause we're the ones doing the work. And let's be honest – they're basically all white men. (P16, Black female, academic)

This excerpt from participant 16 reflects the structures often seen within and beyond the Academy, with the 'snowy peaks' of white men at the top of the (metaphorical) mountain and women and ethnic minority workers at the base (Runnymede Trust 2010). Specifically, they noted how white, male staff seemed to profit directly from these efforts. This reinforces how the centrality of racism is impacted by intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989), with gender and race together garnering differential experiences than when identities are held in isolation. The experiences in the current study also reflect TUC findings that Black workers, and particularly Black women, are most impacted. Their accounts illuminate how the academy operates as a mechanism for social reproduction of inequality, as the system itself is overlain with ideologies dominated by whiteness and patriarchy (Arday and Mirza 2018).

Theme 2 (T2): job insecurity

A strong theme that emerged from the data was around job insecurity, and the impact this had on staff both personally and professionally. The instability of working on a precarious contract was considered by participants to be continually disorientating:

You can't think about things too far ahead, it's just a game of survival. (P6, Black male, academic)

Within the sector and across the labour market more generally, there was a feeling that universities do very little to disrupt the exploitation of staff on precarious contracts, which serves to reinforce the permanence of racism within the Academy (Bell 1992). There was a sense that universities benefit from not being tied into longer-term employment that may require a continual financial commitment.

T2 sub-theme 1: financial insecurity

Within job insecurity, a sub-theme emerged regarding financial security. The narratives presented by participants align with the UCU (2015) survey, which revealed that significant numbers of staff (17%) struggled to secure long-term tenancies or pay mortgages and rent. Other problematic findings which participants aligned with also included household bills and struggling to pay for food and sustenance. Participant five described the impact of their employment type on their financial and living situation:

Institutions know how desperate people are to work in the Academy and they exploit this. I have to stay at friend's houses because no landlord in their right mind would give me a long-term tenancy with my work situation. The whole situation is a depressing, vicious cycle. (P5, Asian, female, academic)

This speaks to the culture of short-term and discontinuous teaching-only contracts, which often only cover term time. This level of instability was considered demotivating and terminally worrying, given that many casualised staff struggled to meet rental agreements outside term time. There was a sense that participants felt trapped within their current roles, so as to be able to meet their and their families' basic physical needs:

I need to make it work, what else can I do? I've got kids, I can't really take any risks right now. (P2, Mixed Heritage female, academic)

The employment status of many participants within their universities was ambiguous, which is symptomatic of a sector that often poorly defines precarious work. Commonly, this involves the absence of pension benefits, maternity pay and sick pay. The range of job roles among participants reflected the following: hourly paid lecturer, external examiner, graduate tutor, teaching assistant, teaching fellow, associate lecturer and visiting lecturer. The lack of security accompanying job precarity often illuminates the problems and absence of clarity about the rights of employees and the obligation required by university institutions to lawfully adhere to this:

I sought advice once, but I ended up tying myself up in knots trying to get to the bottom of it, so just stuck with the contract I was on. But I'm pretty sure I was entitled to more than I got. (P6, Asian male, professional services)

Participants therefore signalled towards a heightened and continuous sense of financial insecurity throughout their precarious professional employment. Generally, there was little qualitative difference found between the experiences of lecturers and professional service staff on hourly paid or zero-hour contracts. Previous research conducted in this area (Lopes and Dewan 2015) asserts that terminological or categorical distinction should be avoided in favour of acknowledging these groups more broadly as hourly paid staff or academics.

T2 sub-theme 2: lack of work–life balance

A second sub-theme emerged, centring on work–life balance. Staff of colour described the sacrifices they made to their personal lives (e.g. working longer hours without pay) due to feelings of insecurity:

I don't have a choice, I don't have the luxury of a permanent job. I work longer hours because I feel like I have more to prove and more to lose. (P13, Asian female, academic)

When you are on a precarious contract you always have to work harder ... [you] are working over hours ... you're completely out of sync, and it really gets you. (P18, Black male, academic)

For participant 11, the additional hours they had to work had an impact on the amount of time they spent with friends and family:

Being on temporary contracts is very difficult, because of the absence of security. As a result you have to take on other fractional jobs and you are left with very little time to spend with family and friends. (P11, Asian female, professional services)

When considering the concept of family labour (e.g. Artazcoz et al. 2007), and how employment can detract from this, it is evident that the implications to go well beyond the individual. As Benach et al. (2014) note, the additional pressures to the family unit can bring about challenges to mental health for any and all of those involved. This pressure may increase further for those families who have additional caring responsibilities, of which a disproportionate number are people of colour (Carers UK 2011).

T2 sub-theme 3: poor mental health

A third sub-theme emerged from job insecurity, which was poor mental health. Echoing research from Allmer (2018), many staff of colour described the sizeable impact their employment had on their well-being:

Being on a precarious contract has undermined my mental state significantly. The anxiety that accompanies precarity is crippling and that's not on top of several bouts of depression. (P12, Mixed Heritage female, professional services)

For participant 13, there was a sense of fatigue that accompanied the continuous nature of their precarious employment status. Consistent with wider research into its impact on psychological well-being (Benach et al. 2014), these feelings of precarity were associated with poor mental health:

My mental health has been shot to pieces by always being on temporary contracts. You know you are being exploited and it's very difficult to do anything about it given the lack of jobs in the current landscape. There's a real professional vulnerability that seeps into your whole life. (P13, Black female, academic)

Participant 16 was explicit that their mental health struggles were related to their employment status. In addition, their treatment as an ethnic minority within the Academy amplified these challenges, which reflects wider literature on staff of colour in academia (e.g. Arday 2021):

My depression is directly linked to having been on precarious contract for 5 plus years now. I suffer from anxiety and depression and as a person of colour, the hostile environments that I work in massively compound my experience. (P16, Black female, academic)

As Benach et al. (2007, 2014) have noted, socio-economic characteristics such as immigrant and ethnic minority status can interact with precariousness to produce differential health effects. The current study provides qualitative evidence to support this, indicating that mental health outcomes are a product of both job insecurity and racism.

This study also provides evidence of the impact of precarious contracts on Black and Mixed Heritage women. As well as reinforcing intersectionality as a critical concept in the understanding of social (socially constructed) issues, this is consistent with research calling for better attention to the mental health needs of Black women (Arday 2021; Pennant 2022), specifically those in academia (Walton, Campbell, and Blakey 2021).

T2 sub-theme 4: transience

Among participants there was also a sense of transience to their experience, in that they moved from place to place in the pursuit and maintenance of employment. This formed the fourth and final sub-theme within job insecurity. It often meant migrating to new cities, which proved to have its own challenges and consequences:

Going from gig to gig over the last ten years has meant that I have never had an institutional home and never been able to stay permanently in a city for more than 6 or 7 months due to the nature of short-term contracts I have been offered.

I keep having to uproot myself to chase the work. I don't know what I'll do when I have kids, I won't be able to keep doing this every couple of years. (P11, Mixed Heritage female, academic)

Participants were clear that if they felt they had the choice, they would not relocate in order to secure employment. However, it seemed they saw it as an essential rung on the ladder towards stable employment or a job closer to home:

Do you know how hard it is to get a job in London? Everybody wants a job in London – especially at a Russell Group. It's impossible – you've got to take what you can get first, and if that means moving up north on whatever contract you can get, so be it. And I can tell you now – as a Black man, I felt a lot less at home up there. (P9, Black male, academic)

There was a sense of displacement from participants, many of whom reluctantly left behind families, friends and the safety of home. Patterns of enforced movement have been shown to deepen racial dominance (O'Hearn and Ciccantell 2021), and as the current study might suggest, feeds the reality that choice and options are a privilege belonging only to the dominant group.

Theme 3: lack of career progression

The final theme identified was a lack of career progression. One of the reasons appeared to centre on not being able to provide evidence of career progression via typical recruitment and selection processes and standards:

It's impossible to progress in your career on temporary contracts. Me personally, I've found this especially difficult when trying to apply for jobs and evidence where I have progressed in my career. On fixed term contracts it's harder to evidence progression because of the lack of continuity. (P8, Black male, academic)

When you attend interviews they are aware that your CV does not reflect career projection, it's impossible to thrive and progress in the Academy without a permanent contract. (P16, Black male, academic)

The need to build up experience and a strong CV in order to obtain more stable employment is somehow at odds with and yet dependent on engaging in unstable forms of employment. In this regard, precarious contracts bring the promise of a carrot but in fact wield a stick:

As an academic ... I have been forced to move between workplaces on hourly-paid and fixed-term contracts, often doing 'outsourced' jobs without access to basic resources such as an office or printing facilities. Often I am completing many hours of marking and supervision which is actually unpaid, in addition to preparing lectures and seminars. You undertake this work knowing you are being exploited but you are powerless to really do anything about this as you need to the experience and employment to build up your CV. (P4, Black female, academic)

This perhaps reflects the cycle of hope and disappointment highlighted in research from Lopes and Dewan (2015). For participant seven, there was an added financial penalty to lack of career progression, which was experienced regardless of ability or job performance:

I have not progressed in my career in terms of salary increases because of how difficult it is being on fixed term contracts. The fact I am good at my job is not recognised. (P7, Black female, academic)

Lastly, for participant 15, lack of career progression reflected a lack of investment from within the Academy:

There is a general lack of investment when it comes to people of colour in my line of work. (P15, Asian female, professional services)

This is consistent with wider UK research that has found employees of colour are more likely to experience progression barriers at work, despite a significantly higher number valuing career progression than their white counterparts (Chartered Institute of Personal Development 2017). This points to a need for the Academy to do more to convert aspiration into opportunity among its workforce of colour, including progression into leadership (Miller 2016).

Conclusion

Drawing on a thematic analysis approach (Clarke and Braun 2017) underpinned by a CRT conceptual framework, this study qualitatively explored the impact and experiences of precarious contracts on staff of colour in higher education institutions. Three key themes emerged, namely systemic racism, job insecurity and lack of progression. These themes and their sub-themes (Figure 1), which are discussed against the existing research landscape, serve to illuminate some of the problems ethnic minorities, and in particular women of colour, experience when attempting to secure permanency within the sector. Detangling discriminatory elements regarding the dearth of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic staff on precarious contracts within higher education remains key to combatting racial disparities in contemporary Britain (Joseph-Salisbury 2017). Limitations of the current study are considered, alongside recommendations for future practice and research.

Limitations

Given the specificity of the participant group, the findings in the current study are not generalisable; rather, the purpose of this study was to illuminate the discriminatory patterns that continue to emerge for staff of colour who are navigating the precariat in higher education. One of the benefits of qualitative inquiry, and specifically CRT, is that the voices and experiences of staff of colour, which are often marginalised from discourse or debate, are centred and brought to the fore. It is recognised that wider perspectives may have further informed this area of research, as has been noted in similar research by Lopes and Dewan (2015). For example, engaging permanent lecturers, union officials, senior leadership, human resources and higher education employment agencies may have allowed for triangulation of data perspectives and therefore a richer understanding. Further interrogation of the differences between types of non-standard employment (e.g. zero-hour, fixed-term) may also have been useful. Importantly, although the emphasis of this article was on race and racism, it is imperative that we do not engender the erasure of particularities spanning the intersection (e.g. gender, sexuality, disability, religion and class). These could all be considered within future research.

In the present study, themes pointed towards the existence of discriminatory and exploitative cultures within the Academy. These were linked to both racism and precarious employment, each often appearing to interact and compound the other, also seemingly moderated by gender. However, readers should exercise caution when interpreting these findings, as quantitative exploration would be required to better discern causality, or to understand the interactive or mediating nature of the factors seemingly at play.

Implications and recommendations

Of the countless ways in which people of colour experience racism, this study suggests that precarious employment is one of them. This is the case for women of colour in particular, whose experiences of racism were also gendered. At the highest level, racism and precarious employment should be considered key public health issues, given their significant impact on people, families, communities and the economy.

It is incumbent on educators and policymakers to expand their understanding of the precariat, specifically how this is experienced by minoritised communities within the Academy. For legislators, policymakers and senior university leaders, clearer definitions and standardisation of rights and benefits regarding non-standard employment would be a step towards more equitable and accessible processes. Better communication and support around these would further redress the negative effects of precarious employment by ensuring clarity and thereby reducing anxiety and confusion, which has been cited one of the most significant factors impacting staff on precarious contracts (UCU 2016b).

However, as imperative as legislative change is, there is a need to move away from a business model that devalues and dehumanises professionals as disposable, replaceable entities in the first place. The scale of precarious employment within the UK higher education system, including its normative culture of exploitation and instability, continues to be a significant failing of the Academy. Given the evidence suggesting that staff of colour and those across the intersection are disproportionately impacted, it is of great importance

that universities engaging in initiatives such as AdvanceHE's Race Equality Charter (the 'REC') incorporate actions that redress precarious employment into their plans. Whilst universities should consider abolition of precarious employment, or at least that they be the exception not the rule, plans should consider the following:

- precarious employment practices should be clearly defined and be accompanied by accessible advice, guidance and support options for those impacted;
- monitoring processes should include data around precarious contracts and intersectional variables, which should be reviewed at senior leadership level to action any disparities; and
- early career researchers, Black staff and women of colour are most likely to be impacted. Those hired under non-standard employment terms should be supported to develop succession or progression plans. The Academy should use these steps to address the 'snowy peaks' within its institutions (Runnymede Trust 2010), particularly the Russell Group where this is most emergent (UCU 2016b). If they need any reason to do so beyond their duty of care towards their staff and students, universities should remember that casualisation impacts negatively on motivation, mental well-being, physical health, staff turnover and productivity (Benach et al. 2014). On the other hand, these all become factors that positively impact those staff of colour whose institutions invest in and build a valued, stable workforce.

Notes

1. Tellingly, the word precarious itself refers to a 'right, tenancy, etc. vulnerable to the will or decision or others; dependent on chance or circumstance; uncertain; liable to fail; exposed to risk, hazardous; insecure, unstable' (Oxford English Dictionary n.d.).
2. The majoritarian mindset is defined as 'the bundle of presuppositions, perceived wisdoms, and shared cultural understandings persons in the dominant race bring to the discussion of race' (Delgado and Stefancic 1993, 462).
3. See Painter's (2010) *The History of White People*.

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