

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the career progress of disabled researchers who are minoritised by race, gender and caring responsibilities

Nicole Brown,^{1,2} Yvonne Robinson,¹ Nicki Martin,¹ Rachel Grant¹ and Preethi Premkumar¹

¹London South Bank University, ²University College London



INTRODUCTION

Academic researchers who are minoritised by disability, race, gender and caring responsibilities experience an uncertain journey in their career progress. Research reports on researchers' job dissatisfaction, social exclusion and their feeling devalued.^{1,2} Also, these minoritised researchers must often conform to the white male stereotype of long working hours and an autonomy-oriented self-hood.^{3,4}

Research further shows that women progress more slowly in their careers and have fewer academic accomplishments and smaller circles of influence than men.^{4,5} Women's relational-oriented self-hood means that they are often assigned more pastoral and teaching duties, as well as caring responsibilities.⁶ As a result, mothers tend to forsake their research careers to fulfil their caring duties.⁷

Lack of representation of racially minoritised researchers hinders the ability of researchers from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds to promote their achievements and they internalise historical oppression.^{3,8} Similarly, disabled researchers experience their academic knowledge being silenced in the face of the normalized able-bodied stereotype.¹

Finally, research relating to the COVID-19 pandemic highlights that female, disabled and non-binary early-career researchers experienced more work disruption due to physical health problems than men and those without a disability.⁹ Women had more familial obligations than men, reducing their time to promote their accomplishments⁹ and junior academic researchers with caring responsibilities experienced slower career progress.¹⁰

It is against this backdrop that this research was conducted.

RESEARCH QUESTION AND AIMS

The research question is:

What is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the career progress of disabled researchers who are minoritised by race, gender and caring responsibilities?

The research aims are:

...to identify the enablers and barriers to the career progress of disabled researchers in the UK as seen during and after the COVID pandemic, and
...to understand how race, gender and caring responsibilities of disabled researchers contributed to their career progress in the UK.

METHODS

Data collection was in three stages:

1. Focus groups: Eight disabled participants took part in either focus groups or interviews in May 2024. One focus group was held with three early-to-mid career researchers. The other focus group was held with three researchers in late career or senior management positions. Two participants were interviewed online. Researchers came from different racial backgrounds, and one participant was male.
2. Online survey: A survey was designed from the key findings of the focus group and administered to academic researchers across the UK. These results are reported in a separate poster.
3. One-to-one interviews: Participants in the survey were invited to an online interview. The interview was based on the survey responses.

This poster reports results from the focus groups and interviews only.

MORE INFORMATION ON THE STUDY

For more information on the study, please, scan the QR code

and/or contact

Dr Preethi Premkumar at premkump@lsbu.ac.uk



RESULTS

Motivations for becoming a researcher were often altruistic and reflected the desire to seek social justice for inequalities observed and experienced during formative years. Research needs to align with and fit around teaching duties. Researchers with a hidden disability are under more scrutiny to justify their work. Choosing to pursue a research career often means moving to a different institution and forsaking the current post.

The COVID-19 pandemic was experienced very individually with it being a relief for some but additional pressures for others. The social distancing measures during the pandemic safeguarded against social anxiety about disabilities and illnesses. Also, the social distancing gave disabled researchers a normalised online identity. However, researchers with caring responsibilities report that their careers stalled during the pandemic, the repercussions of which are still felt now.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations are made at three levels.

At an individual level:

- disability needs to be talked about more
- a culture of celebration needs to be developed
- people need role models for others

At institutional, administrative and policy level:

- uncertainty due to fixed-term and short-term contracts needs to be removed
- online and hybrid ways of working need to be encouraged
- infrastructure must be supported financially to ensure digital inclusion for all
- managerial approaches need to become personalised

For grant funders

- flexible grant criteria and extra funding are needed to accommodate individual needs, e.g., equipment, flexible hours
- funding should be allocated rather than offered in competition

CONCLUSION

Raising the social capital of minoritised researchers involves advocacy through mentoring and widening their social networks.³ Those in managerial roles must create working conditions for disabled researchers that builds their sense of community.¹ Gender-specific interventions in career development have several benefits for women, such as the likelihood of being retained and promoted increased, salary equity, leadership, negotiation and networking.⁵

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