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Is belonging always positive? Cultivating alternative and oppositional belonging at university

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Introduction

Student belonging is a hot topic in UK higher education, particularly since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, given the significant disruption to face-to-face education (UPP Foundation, 2022; Wonkhe, 2022). While student belonging is often considered inherently positive, some students 'actively choose not to belong' (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022, p. 1389), and indeed belonging might be harmful to some, particularly marginalised students (Guyotte et al., 2019), as highlighted by many chapters in this book. In this chapter we build on these discussions through an in-depth analysis of three students' experiences of not belonging – Katherine, Michelle and Khadija (all pseudonyms) – focusing on what we call 'oppositional' and 'alternative' forms of belonging. We ask: is belonging always positive in UK higher education or is it better not to belong in some instances?

Our three case studies are drawn from the Supporting the Identity Development of Underrepresented Students (SIDUS) project, which interviewed 110 'underrepresented' undergraduate students in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) at two pre-1992 elite UK universities. While most interviewees had relatively straightforward narratives of belonging being positive and not belonging being negative, our three case studies were of students who actively cultivated alternative or oppositional forms of belonging in response to exclusionary university, or disciplinary, cultures. The experiences of Katherine, Michelle and

Khadija require more complex understandings of belonging beyond a binary of positive belonging and negative not belonging. To examine their experiences, we draw on Gravett and Ajjawi's (2022, p. 1386) conceptualisation of student belonging as 'situated, relational and processual' and build on discussions of belonging not always being positive, especially for marginalised students (see also Kandiko Howson and Kingsbury, Chapter 1 in this volume).

Alongside this, we use sociological and intersectional understandings of belonging and marginality as dynamic processes actively navigated by people, rather than as fixed or deterministic (May, 2011, 2016; Yuval-Davis, 2006, 2011). We begin by defining 'belonging' and situating our work within the literature on student belonging in STEM, before discussing our methodology and analysis. We argue that there can be a *positive not belonging* when students actively reject dominant belonging discourses because of a difference in values or a refusal to hide or change parts of themselves in order to fit in, and conclude with suggestions for fostering a plurality of (not) belongings in UK higher education and beyond.

(Not) belonging as situated, relational, processual

Belonging is defined by sociologist Vanessa May (2011, p. 368) as 'a sense of ease with oneself and one's surroundings' in relation to other people and to 'more abstract notions of collectively held social norms, values and customs'. While belonging often involves dynamics of inclusion and exclusion – who belongs and who does not – it is not a binary, instead functioning as a multidimensional spectrum and intertwined with intersecting inequalities. For students, belonging might involve feeling at home at their university, on campus or in other university-related spaces (for example student accommodation), or it might be in relation to more specific groupings, such as their academic cohort or discipline.

Students experience a multiplicity of belongings and not belongings to different groups, spaces and ideas; they might feel like a physicist but not feel at home in their specific cohort or they might love their classmates on one course but feel out of place in their broader degree programme. Meehan and Howells (2019, pp. 1376–8) highlight that the idea of belonging at university brings up the question 'How do I fit in?', which is inextricably connected to questions of being – 'Who am I?' – and becoming – 'Who will I be?' And these are sometimes experienced differently in relation to different people, spaces and ideals, complicating monolithic ideas of the student and the student experience.

But, beyond this multiplicity of belonging, it is important to acknowledge that belonging is 'not inherently positive' (Guyotte et al., 2019, p. 556), particularly for students who may face exclusionary student communities or campus climates because they are from one or more marginalised groups. To belong in such a context might require changing oneself to fit in, flattening difference. As Mann (2005, p. 46) argues, 'the word "community" can be seen also to presuppose the idea of exclusion: for belonging and sharing in common imply not belonging and not sharing in common'. Similarly, Gravett and Ajjawi (2022, p. 1393) critique traditional understandings of student belonging as 'a universally positive, uniform experience, and as a fixed state of being' and highlight that some people choose not to belong. They ask: 'who can belong, how, and to where/whom?' (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022, p. 1388), acknowledging the plurality of (not) belongings that students experience in relation to different groups, ideas and spaces, and helping to operationalise their understanding of belonging that is situated, relational and processual.

To better understand not belonging, we return to sociologist Vanessa May's (2016, p. 759) work, in which she describes not belonging as something relational and dialogic that is actively navigated by people. May draws on Cooley's (1902, p. 152) 'looking-glass self' metaphor to explain this relational and dialogic construction of self; Cooley uses the metaphor of a mirror to argue that the way we think of ourselves is impacted by how we imagine others perceive us, and relatedly how they judge us and the subsequent feelings we have about ourselves (May, 2016, p. 750). May (2016, p. 759) changes this metaphor to 'the looking-glass self-other', adding the question 'What do I think of other people?', and applies this to not belonging, explaining that not belonging can result from 'simultaneous rejection *by* others and rejection *of* others'. She discusses examples of not belonging in which people 'perform a counter-act of misrecognition, naming their own criteria against which they judge others', and so the dominant belonging group can be 'excluded from the person's "us"' (May, 2016, p. 760). In other words, people actively negotiate their (not) belonging in dialogue with their internal imagining of other people and may reject dominant modes of belonging through the construction of their own belonging groups. May (2011, pp. 374–5) argues that not belonging can provoke social change because, 'as a result of questioning who "we" are, people construct alternative identities and ways of life'.

We use May's work to inform our understanding of students' oppositional and alternative belonging narratives, which are part of their response to feeling excluded from dominant student belonging discourses in their contexts. Thus, not belonging is both a narrative about students'

individual experiences and a way to understand the exclusionary contours of STEM in UK higher education, in which some people find it harder, or impossible, to belong. Their alternative modes of belonging help us reimagine what the university could be if it were genuinely inclusive of all students (see also Kandiko Howson and Kingsbury, Chapter 5 in this volume). We use these conceptualisations of (not) belonging as a situated and relational process that people actively navigate to consider the experiences of marginalised students in higher education, and specifically in STEM.

Sense of belonging in higher education is an enormous topic, as discussed throughout this book, which often highlights how being underrepresented and/or intersecting inequalities negatively impact on student belonging. For example, O'Keeffe (2013, p. 611) argues that first-generation, ethnic minority and disabled students may feel they have to assimilate and to compromise who they are in order to fit into campus cultural norms. While many students find belonging in extra-curricular activities, students who commute, are part-time or have caring responsibilities often struggle to participate in such activities (Winstone et al., 2020, p. 13) because they do not fit the typical student imagining of someone who is 'young, full-time and residential' (Thomas, 2015, p. 41). In terms of STEM, Rainey et al. (2018, p. 1) found that amongst US undergraduate STEM students white men were most likely to report a sense of belonging and women of colour were least likely. In an extensive literature review on women in STEM, Blackburn (2017, p. 247) found that women (particularly those from marginalised groups) often felt they did not belong in STEM because of sexism, stereotype threat, and concerns about fitting in, which negatively affected their likelihood of continuing in STEM careers (see also Smith, Chapter 9 in this volume).

Marginalised students often feel they have to conform to pre-existing campus cultures which are made by privileged groups and are hard to fit into, including the language and imagery that describe who a STEM student or professional is in their discipline. For example, Ong (2005, p. 593) explores the experiences of 10 women of colour who were studying physics in the US, arguing that their 'belonging and competence in science are questioned because their bodies do not conform to prevalent images of the "ordinary" white male physicist'. This results in the women of colour trying to 'pass' as belonging or as competent, which demonstrates how much effort is expended on performing as a physicist. Ong (2005, p. 595) argues that those women of colour who persevere can experience a high cost, with students having to 'compromise their identities as women, as minorities, or both',

This tells us something about the structures of the university; Puwar (2004, pp. 153–5) argues that higher education is made by and for white upper/middle-class elite men and assimilation alone will not change these spaces. Puwar (2004, p. 8) describes the experience of being perceived as a 'space invader' in exclusionary spaces, such as universities, which are ordered by race, gender and class and thus position certain bodies as being against the 'somatic norm' of the institution. Thus, we examine what student (not) belonging narratives tell us about the university itself, alongside using an intersectional approach to student belonging which acknowledges the impact of multiple intersecting axes of structural inequalities.

Intersectionality means going beyond one axis of structural inequality to acknowledge how different forms of oppression are co-constitutive of each other; specifically, it concerns differences that matter, such as race and ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, disability, nationality and citizenship status. 'Intersectionality' was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) in her work on Black women's experiences falling through the cracks of anti-discrimination legislation in the US. However, similar ideas about the co-constitutive nature of privilege and marginality pre-date Crenshaw's work, including the Combahee River Collective's (1977) discussion of how different forms of oppression 'interlock' and are 'most often experienced simultaneously', which makes it difficult to separate them from each other. And, in STEM, the 'double bind' (Malcom et al., 1976) describes the experiences of women of colour of racism and sexism together; the two create specific forms of exclusion and devaluation (see also Al Arefi, Chapter 10 in this volume).

While intersectional analysis of belonging is uncommon in the STEM belonging literature, there are some notable examples. Rainey et al. (2018, pp. 2, 12) argue that many discussions of differences in the experiences of 'women' and 'men' are actually about white women and men; in their study of US-based undergraduate STEM students they highlight that, amongst men, not belonging was primarily experienced by men of colour. Additionally, Ong et al.'s (2011, p. 173) literature review of 40 years of research on women of colour in STEM (focusing on the US) emphasises that underrepresented minority women (African American, Chicana/Latina and Native American women) are more underrepresented than white and Asian American or Pacific Islander women. However, they argue that, despite Asian American women's proportionate overrepresentation in STEM degrees, they are the lowest-represented demographic group with academic tenure and almost completely absent at professorial level (Ong et al., 2011, p. 180). It is important to highlight

these nuances in the different experiences of racially minoritised women over time, particularly since they can be glossed over and remain invisible if not disaggregated and considered across the whole lifecycle of a career in STEM.

To bring together intersectionality and our conceptualisation of (not) belonging, we use Yuval-Davis's (2011, pp. 12–18) three-layered explanation of socio-political belonging as consisting of:

1. *social locations* – gender, race and ethnicity, class, nationality/citizenship, sexuality, age, disability and so on, which can be understood as intersecting structural identities and hierarchical positions, namely differences that matter in particular times and places;
2. *identifications and emotional attachments* – narratives people tell about who they and others are, which are often attached to particular groupings or collectives and often implicitly construct boundaries between who is included and who is excluded;
3. *ethical and political values* – how different forms of belonging are 'assessed and valued by the self and others' (p. 18), which accounts for different understandings of the 'same' social location; for example, some women are feminists and others are not and so their conceptualisations and analysis of gender are likely to be very different.

While Yuval-Davis (2006, 2011) largely focuses on racialised citizenship and migration in her work, her conceptualisation of belonging and intersecting inequalities is helpful for our discussion, as she considers the complexity of how people narrate their identities, and the impact of ethical and political values. This approach acknowledges the impact of structural inequalities but does not consider identity and positioning as static or deterministic, which helps us to acknowledge the hugely varied experiences of marginalisation and their differential impact on student belonging narratives. And so, Yuval-Davis's work helps us to bring together intersectional and sociological understandings of (not) belonging to consider why some students in our SIDUS research project narrated not belonging in positive terms.

Methodology

The SIDUS Project (2020–22) analysed the experiences of 110 undergraduate students on STEM programmes at Imperial College London and the University of Reading. All participants self-identified as belonging to one or more 'underrepresented' groups in STEM or higher education in general; they included students marginalised on the basis of their gender, sexuality, race or ethnicity, disability or class, alongside those who were first generation to university, mature students (aged 21 or older upon entry to university) and international students (including EU students). Our overall research question was 'How does being underrepresented affect students' identities and career aspirations at university?' We focused on the following broad topics: sense of belonging; interviewee perceptions of the 'typical' and 'ideal' student in their discipline or degree programme and how far they fit into these ideas; future career planning and future professional selves; experiences of being 'underrepresented'; and how their identities and background impacted their student experience. Interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams; we recorded in audio only, which was transcribed, and then thematically coded using NVivo data analysis software.

A key theme from the interviews was the difficulty of school-to-university transition for marginalised students, which was often described as very challenging, particularly by marginalised students who did not see 'people like them' amongst faculty or their student cohort (see also Voice, Purdy, Labrosse and Heath, Chapter 3 in this volume). Many interviewees discussed struggling with going from top of the class at school to getting average or below average grades at university; this was particularly difficult for those in very competitive cohorts, which were common at Imperial College London. Some students from multiple underrepresented groups felt less of a sense of belonging than other students, which negatively impacted their experience at university. Many students managed not belonging by finding belonging in specific student clubs and societies or in non-university spaces. Using our initial analysis, we wrote three articles based on the SIDUS data, which focused on: imposter syndrome (Murray et al., 2022); gendered hierarchies of STEM disciplines which position biology (a more gender-balanced discipline) as easier and less valuable than other disciplines (Wong et al. 2023); and the career trajectories of STEM students (Wong et al. 2022).

When we analysed the data on student belonging for this chapter, we initially examined three of our NVivo codes: 'Difficult sense of belonging or fitting in', 'Good sense of belonging or fitting in' and 'Unsure sense of belonging or fitting in'. While these large codes inevitably flatten complex belonging dynamics, particularly given the huge diversity of students we interviewed, they helped us to navigate the enormous amount of interview data. We discuss the broad student belonging findings in a separate article, currently under preparation, but this chapter focuses on in-depth analysis of three interviews with students who had a 'positive' sense of not belonging.

Most students discussed belonging as positive or not belonging as negative, but these three interviewees – Katherine, Michelle and Khadija – had an unusually positive response to not belonging. They did not feel they fitted into dominant belonging discourses in their contexts, but they had accepted this and narrated alternative or oppositional belonging positively. While their exclusion from dominant belonging discourses was not itself positive (and indeed tells us something about who can belong), we argue that their rejection of dominant modes of belonging is positive, constituting what May (2016, p. 760) calls a 'counter-act of misrecognition'. The three students actively rejected dominant belonging discourses that they could not fit into without changing or hiding parts of themselves or participating in something with which they disagreed (see also Smith, Chapter 9 in this volume). In short, these interviewees rejected the conditions placed on their sense of belonging at university and cultivated alternative or oppositional senses of belonging which helped them survive in exclusionary spaces. We take each student case study in turn, analysing their belonging journey at university through two questions: (1) why and how did they cultivate alternative or oppositional belonging discourses?, and (2) what does this tell us about dominant modes of belonging in their contexts?

Cultivating positive not belonging

Katherine: finding fellow 'outsiders'

Katherine was a final-year natural sciences student of mixed heritage – white British and brown South Asian – who moved around a lot when growing up (mostly between a South Asian country and Britain as a teenager) and described herself as middle-class. However, because her parents' income was in another country, her financial situation did not translate to a middle-class income in Britain, so she received a full

bursary from her university. Katherine's sense of belonging at university was tied to her friendship group rather than to the university or her degree programme:

> I don't think I've ever felt a real sense of belonging with anything organised by [the university]. I felt belonging within my friendship group, but I felt like us as a group were kind of outsiders to the [university] experience. I think if you look at the … typical student. And I wouldn't say I'm one of them. … I think I just want a different life to a lot of people at [the university].

This characterisation of herself and her group of friends as 'outsiders' was a strong theme in her account of time at university. When asked to describe a specific time when she did not feel she belonged at her university, she said: 'I feel like I kind of had a constant sense of outsiderness throughout my whole degree. Yeah. I can't think of like a specific occasion … a general sense.'

Throughout her interview three key reasons seemed to contribute to this outsiderness: having different values and interests to many of her peers; being of mixed heritage; and being less wealthy than many fellow students at her university. Firstly, Katherine explained how her friendship group differed from other students: 'We value other things as well. Like our entire sort of sense of worth is not based solely on our academic performance.'

However, this was mixed with some imposter feelings, because Katherine did not feel she was on the same level as other students, whom she described as 'super-keen and getting really high marks and everything and sourcing out internships for every summer'. Alongside this, she reported a very competitive atmosphere across the university, which was mentioned by other interviewees. In contrast, Katherine described the importance of work–life balance, life beyond university and career planning, and the importance of music and politics in connecting her with her friendship group. When asked what created a sense of identity or belonging for her throughout her degree programme, she replied: 'Music definitely. And I think the people I ended up being friends with … had broader interests beyond science, maybe like philosophy or politics. And we were sort of happy to talk about bigger-picture things.'

Beyond these values and interests, which differed from those of her peers, Katherine discussed the impact of being marginalised on her sense of belonging, specifically this feeling of being in between worlds because of her mixed heritage and her complicated class position in Britain and

in her elite university context. When describing the start of her first year Katherine explained: 'I didn't feel like I fitted in. … I was surrounded with people that I didn't have a lot in common with. … A lot of the people in my halls were quite wealthy.' These class differences were complicated by the dynamics of race and class across borders and how different types of schooling act as proxy measures for class. Katherine explained:

> Class or wealth made a big difference because … there are definitely a lot of private-school people at [the university] and a lot of rich international-school people. … And even though I was technically an international-school student … we never really, like, had a load of money … and there wasn't really, like, a steady income. So I felt like I couldn't really click with people who had kind of lived life with everything handed to them on a plate. And I feel, yeah, I think it was weird because I did feel quite international, but at the same time didn't have that in common with a lot of the international students. So yeah, I think the friends that I ended up making were kind of a lot of people from Europe and from the UK who were not super-rich, who were a little bit more down to earth.

Her experiences demonstrate the importance of situated and relational understandings of how intersecting inequalities work in practice; in her home context she occupied a much more privileged position than she did in Britain and in her elite university. These contexts were centrally important to how she was classed and racialised and to her sense of belonging, which was complicated further by being of mixed heritage.

Katherine discussed a sense of being in between worlds after going to a student society event for people from her specific South Asian background but finding that she did not fit in with either the international students or the British South Asian students, because of her mixed heritage and a lack of connection to some of the cultural markers which she saw other students connecting over, such as food, music and dance. She described her experience of not 'fitting in with either group',which led to a 'strange disconnect. … I'm kind of this weird mixture and those things [cultural markers like food, music and dance] aren't the things that maybe create a sense of identity or belonging for me.' This not belonging and sense of in-betweenness around her dual nationality and mixed heritage was in stark contrast to her very strong sense of belonging to her group of friends, the 'outsiders'. It was significant that this friendship group was composed of other students

from underrepresented groups, specifically working-class and less wealthy middle-class students who connected over a sense of class alienation from their peers.

Using Yuval-Davis's (2006, 2011) belonging framework to understand Katherine's account helps us to disentangle the different intersecting elements of structural positioning, from identifications and emotional attachments and values. Katherine cannot choose her mixed-heritage and class background, which strongly contribute to her not belonging at an elite university, but through finding friends who were also marginalised and understood this not belonging she was able to enact a 'counter-act of misrecognition' (May 2016, p. 760). Katherine and her friends collectively constructed a positive oppositional identity – the 'outsiders' – in response to the dominant belonging narrative at her university (see also Hyland, Chapter 2 in this volume). While this identity is partly rooted in their structural positioning, it is also about values and their specific academic context. As Chiu et al. (2021) argue, the academic culture of a university sets up external expectations of what constitutes the typical or ideal student. In Katherine's case, she discussed rejecting the values of the typical student in her elite university STEM environment: competitive and focused mainly on studying and high achievement at the expense of work–life balance.

Michelle: it's a degree, not my life

Michelle was a mature student who had started her degree at 22, after doing an access course at college. She was a white British student from a middle-class background and is autistic. When asked to describe her first week at university she recounted her experience during the start of the Covid-19 pandemic:

> I guess [I] didn't really feel like I was at university because it was all online and I was in my room. … I was definitely a bit overwhelmed by it all. Because obviously, even though we've got all the materials online, it does feel like I'm doing it on my own a bit. But it hasn't put me off. And I've got my group of friends and other things outside, so this isn't my whole life.

This experience impacted her ability to participate in a learning community on her course and subsequently her sense of belonging. When asked if there were any moments when she had felt a real sense of belonging on her course at university in general, she said: 'I haven't felt,

like, a sense of belonging, but I don't think that's a bad thing. I think it's more just because it's online and I'm not in halls, but I'm not worried about that.' This acceptance was largely due to her being a mature student and having a different approach to university. She discussed being nervous about being a mature student, but said, 'I'm not going to university for the whole social life. I've got my friends at home. A lot of 18-year-olds will go to university to have the experience of parties and making new friends, which I've already done.'

Her sense of belonging with pre-existing friends and family at home meant that she was approaching university differently; the focus on studying rather than on the social life was similar to that of other mature student interviewees in our research. However, there was a complicating factor, as Michelle mentioned a few times in the interview that she felt nervous talking to other people or sometimes struggled with social interaction. She discussed how being autistic affected her experience of her degree:

> I don't put myself out there like other students do. And I do find it hard to talk in a group, so a lot of the times I'm just more of an observer rather than getting involved. I think in the past, especially at school, I've been excluded because I'm very quiet around people.

She described being told in her mid-teens that she might be autistic, but it took time to get an official diagnosis. She was receiving support from her university's disability support office for dyslexia, and they also knew she was autistic, but she had not talked to anyone else at university about being autistic. Her family and her closest friends knew, but she said being autistic was 'not really something I advertise out there because I just don't want to be seen as different'. Later in the interview, she brought up that being an autistic woman could be particularly difficult because of the lack of media representation of autistic women: 'It's mainly a male-viewed thing. I think [being an autistic woman] – that's something that is an extra struggle on top, that some people almost don't believe it.' Thus, Michelle's focus on the degree programme itself rather than on the social side of university life seemed to be due to a mixture of two aspects of her experience: being a mature student with an established adult social life beyond the university, and her navigation of being autistic at university, specifically her concerns about how others would respond to her neurodivergence.

Michelle's distinction between herself and other students draws on a stereotype of the sociable, neurotypical, partying student (see also Leigh et al., Chapter 14 in this volume). This feeling of not fitting into

studenthood, and even not fitting into her own neurodivergence as an autistic woman, presents a double outsiderness, which was potentially exacerbated by online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. It also demonstrates the importance of universities' promoting inclusive understandings of being a student and facilitating multiple modes of student socialising to build inclusive learning communities, including for neurodivergent students. Michelle genuinely seemed happy not to participate in the partying elements of student life, embracing a positive sense of not belonging as a mature student who had a more focused academic relationship to university. However, her sense of outsiderness on her courses did seem to bother her, and this academic outsiderness seemed to be a case of not *yet* belonging but wanting to belong. This was rooted in being marginalised as a neurodivergent student and the complex dynamics of creating learning community through online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic while not living in halls.

As Thomas (2015) says in relation to part-time mature students in UK higher education, they often create spaces of their own away from campus or university, which are essential, as they often do not fit into imaginings of the typical student, as young, full-time, and living in university accommodation. The typical student is also presumed to be neurotypical, and so, while Michelle has mostly described her not belonging in positive terms, it is important that universities appreciate the particular barriers to belonging experienced by mature and neurodivergent students to ensure that belonging remains an option for all students.

Khadija: no longer grateful

Khadija had a difficult sense of belonging at her university because she was hyper-underrepresented as one of very few Black Muslim students, as well as being first-generation and working-class. She described similar experiences at school; after going to her local state school she moved to a private sixth form. In the sixth form she initially felt like an outsider, describing feeling that 'this place really isn't made for you … and you're here but it isn't where you're meant to be'. When she started university, Khadija described being pleasantly surprised by the diversity of students on campus in comparison to school and finding comfort in recognising other students from her sixth form at the same university. However, these initial feelings changed over time:

> At the beginning I was kind of, because of where I'd come from, I was conditioned, I think, or I'd been led to believe that I should just

> accept anything. And there were a few that actually said oh yes, you should be grateful. Whereas now, I think I'm more angry about the situation. And I now think, well, I shouldn't have been made to accept that.

This shift from grateful to angry was informed by her beginning to reflect critically on her experiences at university. She highlighted the importance of universities going beyond widening participation efforts and considering how to support students' belonging and participation at university: 'I don't think [the university] is trying to change things, or, if they are, it's kind of trying to change things in name. … What are you doing so that when they [Black students] get here, they don't feel like they're out of place?'

Khadija sought out the Afro-Caribbean Society (ACS) and the Islamic Society on campus to find people like her. However, she said, 'On campus I'm much more aware of the fact that I'm a Black student, than I am of the fact that I'm Muslim', and because of this ACS was enormously important to her experience at university. She explained that she did not have a sense of belonging at university outside of ACS events, as they provided a sense of belonging that was hard to describe. She tried to explain, saying, 'It's just you talk about the same TV and the same cultures at home, similar food, similar styles of music.' These similar reference points were compared to a language barrier; Khadija did not have to translate herself for the white institution and non-Black peers while she was at ACS, and this was profoundly relieving.

Of course, ACS and Black students at her university were not a monolith; Khadija emphasised the intersection between race, class and nationality, and the importance of disaggregating categories to understand the plurality of Black student experiences. She explained that many Black British students were from working-class backgrounds and so their sense of exclusion was raced and classed, and this was complicated by other intersecting forms of marginality such as gender and religion.

The specificity of different racialised experiences within the 'BAME' category was particularly important; Khadija highlighted that Black staff were hyper-underrepresented even in comparison to other ethnically minoritised groups. Khadija described having had no Black women teachers and one Black man teacher, and the rare occasion when she had met a Black woman in her professional field outside of university. As she put it, 'Okay, cool, you've brought the ME [minority ethnic], but there is no B [Black]', calling attention to the issues associated with the abbreviations 'BME' or 'BAME' which conflate different experiences

of being ethnically minoritised. Khadija explained that this category tended to hide the issues facing Black students specifically, and also the differences within the category of 'Black': a wealthy international student from Nigeria has a very different experience of race and class and nationality from that of a Black British working-class student with Ghanaian and Jamaican heritage. As Selvarajah et al. (2020) argue, the term 'BAME' is a governmental term that centres whiteness as the norm, homogenises non-white groups and avoids recognising the centrality of power and hierarchy in racialised categorisation. Thus, they advocate using specific, locally appropriate terminology to name groups, alongside using 'minoritised' as a helpful general term instead of 'BAME' to acknowledge the active processual and complex nature of intersectional forms of discrimination and power structures.

Khadija's (not) belonging changed over time as she became more critical of her highly racialised experiences of education. This demonstrates how processual belonging and narratives of belonging are, with emotional attachments to different belonging discourses sometimes changing over time. This process is reminiscent of Sobande's (2018, p. 96) 'accidental academic activism' concept, whereby 'To be Black and a woman in academia is often to be regarded as a political presence, before even having uttered a word', which prompts a more critical stance vis-à-vis the academy. Khadija's move from gratefulness to anger is particularly important, as anger is a highly policed emotion for Black women – with the disciplining spectre of the 'angry Black woman' stereotype (Ahmed, 2010, p. 68; Doharty, 2020) hovering over her student experience – and yet, as Audre Lorde ([1984] 2019, pp. 123, 120) argues, anger is 'an appropriate response' to racism and 'can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change'. Khadija's anger is in response to the hyper-underrepresentation of Black students and her realisation that her white-majority sixth form school had primed her to accept rather than question her experiences of (not) belonging.

The importance of ACS cannot be overstated, both for Khadija and for others at her university, as it was described in similar ways by other Black student interviewees; this student-run, Black-majority space provided an alternative (and sometimes oppositional) space of belonging on campus where they did not need to translate themselves for non-Black students and staff. Lastly, Khadija's critique of the BAME umbrella category and the intra-categorical complexity of Black as a grouping provides an important reminder to researchers and universities to acknowledge the intersectional complexity and specificity of student experiences of (not) belonging.

Discussion

These three case studies complicate binary discussions of belonging that consider belonging to be inherently positive and not belonging inherently negative. They demonstrate how students actively negotiate university life, positioning themselves in relation to discipline- and university-specific cultures in which academic and social elements of studenthood are sometimes hard to disentangle. However, these negotiations are not fully or freely chosen, because university life is structured by and for dominant groups with associated imaginings of studenthood in mind; these can be exclusionary of those who do not fit in, positioning Others as 'space invaders' (Puwar, 2004; see also Hyland, Chapter 2 in this volume). The experiences of Katherine, Michelle and Khadija tell us something about their individual experiences and about the structure of elite higher education and STEM in the UK, highlighting who is assumed to be there, who fits in and who does not.

Katherine, Michelle and Khadija narrated their not-belonging experiences through what we call oppositional and alternative belonging. Both of these narratives involved not fitting into dominant modes of belonging, and while these narratives were slightly different from each other there were often shades of both in the three case studies. We conceptualise oppositional belonging as defining oneself against the dominant mode of belonging, often in ways that critique the dominant belonging narrative, for example Michelle's construction of mature students versus 'partying' non-mature students, or Katherine's friendship group seeing themselves as 'outsiders' because they opposed the high-achieving competitive academic culture of their university. Alternative belonging involves creating a separate positive space focused on an element of one's identity, background or interests that provides a sense of belonging.

The oppositional narrative of being 'outsiders' also provided this alternative belonging space for Katherine and her friends because of their focus on finding common ground through music, politics and being less wealthy than their peers. Similarly, ACS was important for Black students such as Khadija because it provided an alternative space of belonging that did not necessarily hinge on opposing dominant modes of belonging, but merely on acknowledging the significance of being hyper-underrepresented. However, Khadija's belonging narrative changed over time, becoming more critical of dominant modes of belonging, and of institutional anti-Blackness and other, intersecting exclusions, ultimately acknowledging the oppositional elements of her alternative belonging.

Michelle's oppositional and alternative belonging narratives were slightly more complicated, particularly given that she was a first-year student; perhaps she does not *yet* belong, and her narratives will change as she progresses through her degree; hence the importance of acknowledging the ongoing processual nature of belonging.

Alternative and oppositional belonging narratives were positive stories students told about their not belonging. This positive not belonging involved students responding to different forms of exclusion on multiple levels. Yuval-Davis's three-layer socio-political belonging framework helps to distinguish these dimensions: they experienced exclusion (and sometimes alternative spaces of belonging) based on their being underrepresented and/or marginalised because of class, race, age or neurodivergence; they rejected dominant modes of belonging, performing 'counter-acts of misrecognition' and identifying with alternative or oppositional belonging narratives, often connecting such disidentification with a broader ethical and political critique of their exclusion. These different responses to not belonging tells us something about the structure of universities. Who is presumed to be the student? In what ways is the university designed for them? And is it possible for the university to be redesigned for a multiplicity of students and studenthoods?

Conclusion: a pluralistic belonging model

In this chapter we have considered whether student belonging is always positive in UK higher education or if it is better for some students to embrace not belonging. Using in-depth analysis of three students' experiences, we identified some positive lack-of-belonging accounts in which students constructed alternative and/or oppositional belonging narratives in response to feeling excluded from, or disagreeing with, dominant belonging discourses in their context. Thus, we argue that for some students it would be damaging to their sense of self or betray their values if they were to attempt to fit into dominant belonging narratives. Our three students were unable to fit into dominant belonging discourses largely because they were marginalised and/or underrepresented as well as disagreeing with certain dominant ideas of 'the student' or 'studenthood' in their context. Their stories tell us something about university spaces, communities and ideas; belonging to the university is easier for some students than for others, as it is structured by inequality. However, the connection between inequality and belonging is not

deterministic, as students can actively negotiate their contexts and reject dominant modes of studenthood and belonging to create new spaces of student (not-)belonging.

These alternative/oppositive belongings were most effective when they were collective, as in the case of Katherine's group of friends and their 'outsider' narrative or Khadija and her feeling of being at home in her university's Afro-Caribbean Society. For Michelle, while her life outside of university provided an alternative space of belonging, there was a sense that she was still looking for some academic belonging on her course, even though she rejected the dominant idea of the 'partying' non-mature student. Thus, positive not belonging is not always possible without sufficient support from others, whether informally from friends or family or institutionally through the structure of courses, academic cultures and student support services. Not belonging is an understandable response to exclusion and, rather than internalising it as an individual issue, we argue for collective and institutional responses.

Firstly, intersecting inequalities impact belonging, and so tackling forms of discrimination, bullying and harassment proactively is a crucial part of supporting student belonging. While university and STEM-specific equality, diversity and inclusion efforts are commonplace, they can often function as 'non-performative' (Ahmed, 2012); that is, they do not do what they say they do, but instead focus on being seen to do good rather than on tackling difficult issues like sexual harassment, racism and bullying. Additionally, competitive academic environments and disciplinary hierarchies that value some academic disciplines, forms of knowledge and knowers/learners over others are central to producing inequalities, particularly in elite universities and STEM environments. For instance, as we state in other articles based on the SIDUS project, competitive academic environments produce imposter feelings particularly in multiply marginalised students (Murray et al., 2022), and disciplinary stereotypes about the typical or ideal STEM student are often coded in gendered, racialised and classed ways, which contribute to exclusionary ideas about who can be in STEM (Wong et al., 2023).

Secondly, it is important for universities to provide more opportunities for students to connect with each other in order to support belonging. Wonkhe's (2022, p. 55) survey of student perceptions of belonging asked what would help students feel a greater sense of belonging at their university; across all demographics and modes of study, more and closer friendships and peer networks (such as getting to know more people on their course) were a central theme. Knowing this provides a helpful steer for university workers and student representatives

interested in facilitating student belonging: they can create spaces for students to connect with each other to encourage more and deeper friendships and peer connections alongside proactively tackling barriers to connection. Such a step requires a rethink about university and students' union messaging concerning who is a student and who belongs, and increasing the variety of student societies and cohort-building social activities to accommodate students with different access needs, preferences, interests, schedules, housing and financial situations, and family and caring responsibilities.

Thirdly, some students may focus entirely on the academic aspects of university life, as demonstrated by Michelle's experience as a mature student. For these students, who may not feel they belong socially, it is still important that they feel they matter in the classroom and academically. Relational pedagogy, based on the principle of being intentional about building relationships which support student learning (Su & Wood, 2023), provides a helpful framework for thinking about supporting a plurality of student (not) belongings. It involves supporting their sense of mattering and of having positive interactions with staff and fellow students, and building this into the structure of academic courses. As Gravett et al. (2021) argue, there are opportunities to shift pedagogical practice in the everyday materiality of learning and teaching, through, for example: the co-creation of reading lists; the rearrangement of classroom spaces to decrease power imbalances and flatten hierarchies between teacher and learner; informal opportunities to connect with staff, particularly when teaching is online, which affords fewer opportunities to engage with staff in ad hoc ways; and the dispersal of assessment throughout modules and the inclusion of self- and peer-assessment. However, the facilitation of such pedagogies of mattering often requires more energy and time than staff have in UK higher education. Any discussions about changing curricula and pedagogical practices must be grounded in the material constraints of overworked and often precariously employed staff who are teaching increasing numbers of students in a cost-of-living crisis. Student belonging does not happen in a vacuum; it must be considered in the context of students dedicating more time to paid employment during their studies because of financial concerns along with a debt-based model of financing for many accessing UK higher education.

This chapter acknowledges the creative ways in which students respond to exclusionary cultures, carving out pockets of belonging at, or beyond, university as alternatives to, or in opposition to, dominant modes of belonging. The production of alternative or oppositional forms of (not) belonging tells us something about the exclusionary nature of UK higher

education and the increased diversity of studenthoods. Universities need to continue to take responsibility for changing exclusionary cultures, supporting a multiplicity of (not) belongings, and making time and space for more relational pedagogical practices that allow for the diversity of student experiences and related learning needs.

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