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# ‘I haven’t met one’: disabled EU migrants in the UK. Intersections between migration and disability post-Brexit

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**ABSTRACT**
Historically, disability studies have ignored the experiences of people who migrate, while migration studies frequently excluded disabled people. This is a surprising omission from both fields of study given that many disabled people are migrants, and many migrants are disabled people. There is a clear lack of knowledge about disabled people among migrant populations. Most, if not all, studies in this area focus on disabled people among forced migrant populations; this paper focuses on voluntary migrants from the EU living in the UK during the Brexit transition period. We report findings that are part of a larger qualitative study conducted in 2018–2019 in the north of England. This paper is based on four in-depth interviews with disabled EU migrants and three key informant interviews with representatives from organisations that work with migrant and disabled people. The research findings indicate that disabled EU migrants in the context of Brexit represent some of the most invisible and vulnerable people in the contemporary UK. The contradicting stereotypical perceptions of cheap physical migrant labour (highly classed issue) and disability linked to economic unproductivity, lead to the invisibility of disabled migrants in theory and practice.

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## Introduction

Disabled people and migrants represent significant minorities worldwide (Mosler Vidal 2022). They are among the most vulnerable and prone to exploitation (Buckley et al. 2015; Duda-Mikulin, Scullion, and Currie 2020). Despite this, disability and migration have rarely been considered concurrently (Burns 2019; Hughes 2017; Pisani and Grech 2015). The complex needs of disabled migrants are largely unmet and unnoted with a lack of reliable and consistent data on their number and profile (Couldrey and Herson 2010). Migration policies exclude disabled people, and disabled migrants remain a hidden population (Trotter 2012). Disabled migrants continue to be characterised by epistemological, ontological and practical invisibility. ‘Migration theory grows without the disabled person, disability studies without the migrant and practice without the disabled migrant’ (Pisani and Grech 2015, 425). We here acknowledge the whiteness of disability studies and a lack of disability within migration studies scholarship. While forced

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migrants, due to the nature of their movements, are or may become disabled, other groups of migrants may also identify as disabled (Yeo 2021). This paper focuses on the latter, on voluntary migrants from within the EU living in the UK.

This article contributes to discussions on intersections between migration studies and disability studies in the bid to impulse inclusive theory, policy and practice that will contribute to the inclusion and well-being of disabled migrants. This research is timely given the context of the 'hostile environment'[1] of the post-Brexit UK, the rise of populism and neoliberalism worldwide, the legacy of Trump presidency, anti-migrant discourse perpetuated by war and humanitarian crises at the EU borders (Poland-Ukraine and Poland-Belarus), and an increased transnational mobility which all sparked a spike in hate crimes against migrants (Agerholm 2016; Taylor 2017) and disabled people (Inclusion London 2017). This paper explores the experiences of disabled EU migrants in the UK in the context of Brexit as this group represents some of the most invisible and vulnerable people in the post-Brexit UK and worldwide (Duda-Mikulin 2023).

We write this paper to add a voice to several other works on this topic. Duda-Mikulin, Scullion, and Currie (2020) previously argued for more research in these areas and a more inclusive debate around migration and disability. 'Migrants, disabled people and disabled migrants are among the most marginalised individuals today whilst the neoliberal rhetoric, Brexit in the UK and Trump in the USA have criminalised their lives' (ibid., 13). We would like to add to research by Burns (2019, abstract) where she asserted that 'the pathologising of disability remains a central discourse within immigration policy, with the fusion of health and disability and related arguments about cost/burden being utilised as a means by which to deny entry to particular bodies'. Hughes (2017) previously emphasised ethnocentric and ableist preconceptions that disability and migration studies share. He argued that in the present-day UK both disabled people and migrants are represented as 'idle and morally disreputable' (ibid., 1), are 'among the most invisible' (2) and 'conceived as social outliers' (4). We wish to continue this debate and bring more attention to the intersections between migration and disability. And thus, we utilise the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989) which emphsises that various axes of difference intersect in one's life in such a way as to produce a truly unique experience of discrimination and/or privilege. In this paper, we focus on two vectors of power: migrant status/origin and (dis)ability/impairment/chronic condition. This is while we acknowledge that many others may be at play (e.g. gender, sexuality, religion, etc.).

This research about disabled EU migrants addresses the contradicting stereotypical perceptions of cheap physical migrant labour (in itself a highly classed issue) and disability linked to economic unproductivity, leading to the invisibility of disabled voluntary migrants in theory and practice.

## Health, belonging and othering

Vast sociological and psychological literature describes the processes of developing an understanding of one's health condition (Broyer 2012; Groce and Zola 1993) or assuming a sick role (Goffman 1959). Existing research focuses mostly on an illness set in the specific cultural context and/or is pertinent for practical issues such as treatment adherence (Abubakari et al. 2013; Eshiett and Parry 2003; Grewal, Stewart, and Grace 2010; Owiti et al. 2015). Disability is seen as a characteristic that magnifies other minority identities, and opens the way to discrimination (Siebers 2008) or a determining category for other social identities (Lejzerowicz 2017). Exploration of the opposite – the way one's migration status influences their disability identity seems to be lacking. The risk of missing out on support may be increased due to disabled migrants traditionally seen as those who became disabled during conflict when fleeing dangerous circumstances (Berghs 2017; Gilgen et al. 2005; Grupp et al. 2018). A disabled voluntary/economic migrant seems to be a person rarely or never encountered in practice or academic literature.

In common understanding and public perception, certain stereotypes are linked to EU migrants to the UK. Arguably, pre-2016 EU migrants were seen as desirable, with strong work ethic, hard-working individuals put against the more visibly different ethnic minority people (Trevena 2009). They contributed by filling gaps in the employment market. The Brexit campaign blamed EU migrants for the failures of the government (Duda-Mikulin 2019). On the other hand, disabled people are commonly thought of as mostly reliant on social welfare benefits hence unfit for work due to their health status (Goodley 2016). The stereotype of cheap physical labour force clashes with the stereotype of disability and perceived inability to engage in paid work, which leads to the assumption that there are none or few disabled economic migrants. This may be why disabled migrants appear to be invisible in theory and practice as they portray a contradiction in terms (also see Hughes 2017). Internalising the productive migrant stereotype may also lead to avoidance in disclosing disability and/or seeking support (Trevena 2009). However, this paper shows that some EU migrants are disabled and thus there is a need for a more inclusive debate around their rights and entitlements.

A disabled migrant must navigate very complex systems, not one but two, related to intersecting axes of difference or hierarchies of privilege and oppression (Crenshaw 1989). There is a system-level challenge related to the prevalent global capitalism, society level expressed in certain social norms and traditions related to any given society, stereotypes challenge in which individuals are scrutinized against widespread beliefs about the groups they belong to, and an individual level of perceiving self as useful and not a burden. This is an extremely complex situation to navigate, requiring good health and cognitive and emotional resources. All of which might be in short supply due to ill health (Conversano 2019; Megari 2013; Turner and Kelly 2000). Thus identification as both a disabled person and a migrant may lead to falling through the gaps in existing support networks.

Matters related to non/disclosure can hurt one's well-being and welfare (Beiser and Hou 2014). Individuals need to disclose their condition to access emotional, social and financial support. Additionally, having a record of claiming social welfare may become the only way to secure Settled Status[2] in post-Brexit UK for those, who were not able to work due to ill health. However, disclosure, or relying on state support, goes against the requirement of productivity and the image of a 'good' migrant (Godin 2020). The notion of productivity about migration and disability and the neoliberal logic renders some bodies as non-productive, and therefore there might be the need to prove deservingness like in the case of the interviewed disabled migrants.

As Blachnicka-Ciacek et al. (2021) argue, Central and Eastern European (CEE) migrants in the UK will never belong to the 'community of value' as they have fallen victims of the belonging and deservedness debates. They often have to prove their worth and deservedness while some of them position themselves as un-belonging. This is while racialised Britishness and belonging of the majority is never questioned, whereas migrants self-legitimise when using deserving and undeserving language. The divisive language of British politics has been present for decades; still, the anti-immigrant sentiment reached its peak around the time of the Brexit referendum and is arguably still at play (cf. Duda-Mikulin 2019).

While othering is inherent to capitalism and those racially privileged are white, there is a hierarchy within white groups and those from CEE regions are considered less privileged Whites (Kalmar 2023). Thus EU migrants are classed and racialised others as the recent papers from a special issue of this journal demonstrate (see, e.g. Lewicki 2023; Rzepnikowska 2023). Many CEE migrants project their racialisation onto others while racially excluding other groups whereby they maintain a broader racial hierarchy. Narkowicz (2023) notes that Polish migrants to the UK occupy a racially privileged and racially marginal position all at once. After Gillborn (2015), we assert that there are many commonalities between the terms 'race' (and 'ethnicity') and 'disability'. They are both usually assumed to be relatively obvious and fixed but are socially constructed categories that are constantly contested and redefined. Historically, they have both operated to define and oppress.

## Methodology

The interviews included in this paper were collected within a larger study exploring the intersections between migration and disability. In particular, its focus was on points of overlap and separation between these two categories, production of these disabling categories, and exploration of intersections of disability and migration in policy and practice in the context of Brexit. The fieldwork took place in the north of England at various locations including cafes, respondents' workplaces and homes. The whole project sample comprised individuals who self-identify as voluntary migrants, people with disabilities as well as disabled migrants and key informants. Ethical approval from the Ethics Committee at the University of Bradford, UK, was sought and gained before the start of the research. Although this research was carried out in 2018–2019, we believe that the analysis still has relevance to migration and disability scholars as many issues related to the situation of disabled EU citizens currently living in the UK remain valid today. This project was funded by a Kickstart Grant awarded by the Sociological Review Foundation.

This paper presents findings from an analysis of four interviews with migrants from the EU, who live permanently in the UK and who have experienced migration and disability or chronic health conditions affecting their day-to-day functioning. These were chosen from the sample as those who represent EU migrants with disabilities by a way of self-identification. One of the participants has a mental health condition (Katarina[3]), one chronic illness (AMC), one has sensory disability (Anne) and one is a wheelchair user (CL). All four participants are female and achieved university-level education; all are in employment in line with their education. A term Disabled Migrants (DMs) will be used across the paper to refer to this group.

These interviews are complemented with three interviews with key informants (KIs) – persons who work with migrants and/or disabled people in the UK. Two informants are male and British, one of them physically disabled (Harry), the other with some experience of mental health issues (Alex). The third key informant is female and a dual British–French citizen who is non-disabled (Olivia). One of them works with migrants and disabled people but mostly separately (Alex), one works as disability rights activist (Harry), and one works as migrants' rights activist (Olivia).

The sampling strategy for the whole project relied on purposive sampling with some snowballing. These were chosen due to the specificity of the themes under exploration. Further demographic details of the research participants can be found in the table below. It needs to be explained that the disabled migrants who were interviewed by chance happened to be all women.

Disabled migrants:

| Pseudonym | Nationality | Age | F/M | Education | Line of work | Disability/chronic illness |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| AMC | Italian + British | 44 | F | PhD | Academic | Blood clotting condition |
| CL | German | 42 | F | MA | Journalist, Activist | Wheelchair user |
| Anne | Dutch | 40 | F | Degree level | Academic | Partially sighted, autistic + |
| Katarina | Slovak + British | 42 | F | PGT | Debt Adviser | Anxiety and depression |

Key informants:

| Alex | British | 60 | M | BA | Community Worker, Activist |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Harry | British | 35 | M | MA | Self-employed entrepreneur, Activist |
| Olivia | French + British | 38 | F | L3 Diploma, in education | Support Worker, Activist |

We employed thematic analysis (Clarke and Braun 2013) and used a deductive approach guided by the concept of the intersectionality of migration and disability. In the analysis, we focused on how participants talked about both experiences and how the experiences intersected in the interviewee's accounts to show a range of individual perspectives. We positioned the accounts of KIs as providing the context for the DMs' perspectives.

We started the analysis by reading the verbatim transcripts of recorded interviews to familiarise ourselves with the interviews and to develop initial codes and themes ideas. Following that, through discussions, we carried out with revisions and refining of codes and themes up until the writing-up stage. At the final step of the process, we reviewed the written-up themes to ensure that they accurately reflected the content of the interviews. Although all interviews were carried out before the actual Brexit day (31 January 2020) though after the Brexit referendum (23 June 2016), we analyzed after the UK left the EU.[4]

We would like to offer a reflexive note here. As migrants with different personal histories of migration and chronic illness but who share the experience of Central and Eastern Europeans living in the UK for several years, we found the stories shared by DMs resonating closely with our own, often emotionally difficult experience. This influenced our analysis, as we approached it from the perspective of familiar strangers (Agarwal et al. 2009), personally affected by and professionally engaged in the issues discussed in this paper and at the same time strangers with regard to certain health needs and lived experience in comparison to the research participants. We also approached the data from two different disciplinary perspectives as EDM is a Sociologist of sorts with a PhD in Social Policy and MG has a PhD in Health Psychology. We believe that our varied personal experiences and professional perspectives, the outsider researcher and having insider experience, helped us to achieve a greater depth of understanding of the issues at hand as we were constantly challenging and clarifying our assumptions on these themes. This allowed us to avoid automatically seeking a discipline-defined framework for analysis.

## Findings and discussion

In this section, we report three themes we developed related to the intersectionality of migration and disability. They are: 'A productive migrant vs cost risk', migrants defined by productivity (1); 'Being strategic about disclosing disability', seeing disability through the migration lens (2); and 'An unwanted guest', re-establishing oneself in post-Brexit future (3). The relation between the themes is presented in a diagram below, with being a migrant taking central place, being disabled placed behind it, and Brexit context encircling it (Figure 1). While the interviews were conducted in English, the quotations included in the text were edited for readability (added punctuation and removal of repetitions and fillers such as 'erm', yeah').

### A productive migrant vs *'cost risk' (CL), only the productive migrant is worthy*

The first theme 'A productive migrant vs cost risk' focuses on beliefs regarding migrants' productivity requirement and how the perception of worthiness defines migrants' value. This belief that disability creates an obstacle to meeting the productivity requirement was shared by all DMs.

They highlighted that they were employed and therefore were earning their place in society, to meet the criteria for a 'desired' 'contributing' migrant. It is noteworthy that all volunteered information about their employment status without being prompted about it. All DMs as well as the disabled KI (Harry) highlighted that they can be productive despite their disabilities.

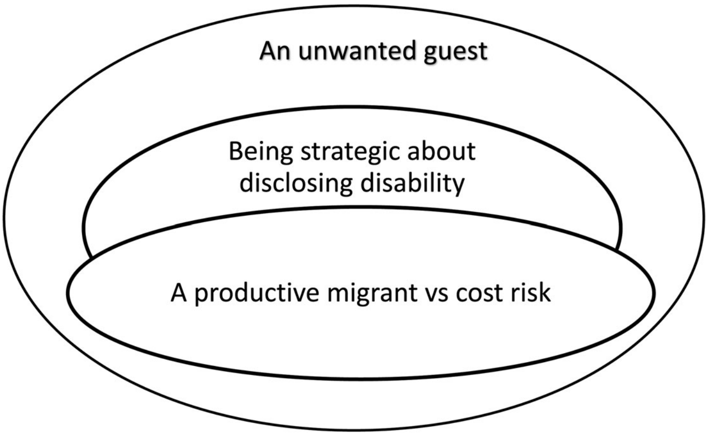

**Figure 1.** Migration, disability and Brexit.

Throughout the interviews, migrants' identity took precedence becoming a lens through which the DMs saw their conditions. On the one hand, the importance of changing the narrative around migrants' reliance on welfare and seeing them through a productivity lens was highlighted by interviewees (El-Lahib and Wehbi 2012); on the other hand, they ensured that there was no doubt regarding their productivity value. It was not in migrants' power to define their worth (purely economic), but it is in the host society's hands. This demonstrates the depth of the productive migrant stereotype internalisation (Godin 2020).

However, being employed and therefore productive seemed insufficient in defining one's place in society. DMs highlighted that their employment was perceived through stereotypes about their nationality. Sometimes, this meant, having to justify one's professional position, especially if their country of origin was seen as supplying mainly cheap manual labour. As Katarina's explained how she was perceived in a professional context:

> … the majority of people who is here from the European Union or mainly from Eastern Europe which I can relate to, work here in the hospitality sector or in factories and so on. And we are, like yourself and myself, we are highly educated, if I had the same lifestyle I had in [country of origin], there is no difference (…) and so sometimes it's like, "Oh, so you're not a cleaner, you're not … ?" I said, "No, unfortunately I have to disappoint you".

DMs felt they need to work harder (than British-born people) to prove their worth and to be professionally recognised as Katarina said: *I think all of us [migrants], (…) we have to work twice much harder to be recognised.*

Being a disabled migrant was seen as a drain on the host country and therefore not being entitled, legally or morally, to receive support. This sentiment appeared across interviews expressed in words such as 'scrounger' (Anne), 'fraud' (CL), 'burden' (Anne, CL). There was also an awareness that these perceptions do not apply to migrants only but are more challenging for them in comparison to British-born people. According to CL, both identities intersect on a formal level:

> I think that all these issues are very much linked. It is disability status, it is migrant status, it is income status in terms of receiving benefits or not or being means tested for benefits to be very honest DLA [Disability Living Allowance] and PIP [Personal Independent Payment] is not just a migrant issue.

The belief that a migrant should be self-sufficient and not rely on the welfare system was common as set by the EU Freedom of Movement rights awarded to those who are either in paid work or self-sufficient persons.[5] Anne pointed out that she avoided being reliant on social welfare; yet, she said she experienced 'othering': *Even in hospitals … I'm personally treated as a scrounger*. For Anne access to personal resources provides protection against needing to seek support and being seen as a drain on public resources but also can provide a relief from 'navigating for survival'. She pointed out that avoiding social welfare benefits made her seek support from other people placing additional burden on her:

> I've been really afraid of relying on benefits (…) And I had to put myself in very complicated situations that made my situation worse in a way to not have to rely on benefits. So I had to rely on other people to not rely on benefits because of being a migrant and because of benefits being so horrible.

A different strategy was applied by Katarina, who sought benefit from differences in approach to diagnosis and treatment by navigating between both, sending and receiving country systems, to gain optimal care and support.

Discussing legal position of disabled EU migrants in the UK, CL noted that the EU Freedom of Movement was limiting the opportunities for disabled people to move between countries as this right is rooted in the concept of being economically active or self-sufficient 'So that is something that is even in the European Treaty so that if you get too expensive for the host country they can send you home, say, in very plain English'. The definition of an economically contributing migrant who is not a burden is very narrow. This results in excluding disabled people and their carers, and makes the change in one's health status difficult in terms of their migration status. This view was shared by Anne who pointed out that being disabled and requiring support limits the opportunities to be a labour migrant. CL called for a revision of this purely economic view of migration as in her view disabled people's rights to family life should be central to the EU values:

> I find it highly problematic that disabled people are mainly seen as a cost risk in the treaty but very often immigration policies of countries as well and I think it is important to see disabled people not as a burden …

Alex's (KI) brought attention to wider socio-political issues in which migrants are seen as low-level cheap labour, exploited by capitalism. From his perspective, migrants, especially from Central and Eastern Europe ' … are a cheap economic resource'. This is linked to the stereotype of a migrant doing basic physical jobs. Alex also highlighted dehumanising and one-dimensional side of the 'hard working migrant' stereotype which is linked to another stereotype of migrants 'stealing jobs' from British workers, also brought up by Katarina.

## 'Being strategic' about disclosing disability (Anne), seeing disability through the lens of migration.

The second theme focuses on whether and how DMs self-identified as disabled, what it meant for them to be disabled or chronically ill and what impacted the decision to disclose it. Throughout the interviews, migration status seemed to be the lens through which DMs defined their disability. This affected how they made sense of their disability, whether they disclosed information about their health, sought support or how they felt about becoming ill, disabled, or migrating.

Identifying oneself as disabled, disclosing disability and recognising its impact on one's life together with a perception of own health issues varied across the accounts of the participants. Katarina and Anne self-identified as disabled and at the same time recognised their disability as a part of their normal life. Anne was not open about details of her health issues. AMC, despite her chronic condition and other health issues, did not accept a disability identity.

In line with existing literature, issues around disclosure of health conditions were determined by what DMs viewed as the potential outcome of such acts. Disclosing health status may increase the risk of being seen as unworthy/unproductive thus not 'allowed' to stay in the UK post-Brexit (cf. Roberts 2000) and reluctance to disclose disability may be driven by fear of discrimination in the world of paid work (Grimes et al. 2019). In the interviews, similar concerns were raised in the context of worsening health condition or new illness or disability (cf. Parks 2021). These fears are justified especially in the context of the pre, and post-Brexit rhetoric focused on attracting 'best and brightest', contributing through paid work and removing those who are a burden to the country (Aroshidze 2018; Horová 2021). This is further reinforced by already observed discriminatory practices towards EU citizens in the UK (Di Stasio and Heath 2021). Policies of other countries dismissing visa applications on the grounds of a range of health issues (El-Lahib 2015; Yu 2014) frequently brought up during Brexit campaign, may also increase the anxiety of those EU migrants who have health issues. This may lead to prolonged stress and uncertainty which can in turn worsen mental and physical health (Cohen, Gianaros, and Manuck 2016; Lovallo 2015).

The decision whether to identify as disabled and disclose disability/health status was linked to interviewees' beliefs around health and illness but it also depended on the openness of the interviewee's wider environment, especially for DMs with invisible conditions. Katarina felt that mental health issues are openly discussed in her work in social care, meeting her expectation for the field of work open to the topic, supported by the employer and protected through legislation. She explained:

> Because my team are very small and we are very close and I work in the field of social work and we do talk openly about, everything you know, positive or negative things or when somebody struggles with something and it's more about the support than about not helping.

This gave Katarina confidence to disclose her condition without the fear of discrimination (unlike in her country of origin), as she said, 'I don't feel threatened, I don't feel that I will lose my job'. According to Katarina, this was a result of relatively better recognition of invisible disabilities, classifying mental health issues as disabilities and her trust in the UK and its laws that aim to protect people with disabilities (The Equality Act 2010), all despite her view that better treatment options are available in her country of origin: *They will do more in Eastern Europe, not here.*

The other DMs (AMC, Anne) did not share Katarina's view and thus avoided disclosing their health issues due to a fear of discrimination. They shared the belief that being a migrant with a health issue would disadvantage them in their highly competitive work environment. Anne's experience of a lack of understanding in her place of work reinforced her decision of limited disclosure to remain employable, as she explained:

> Well first of all I'm not open, I'm not out about a lot of things, only cautiously out (…). But it's one thing to say you're disabled; the other thing is to say what are your impairments (…) If I were to out all my impairments, I don't think I would get a job. So, I say the things that are least threatening (…) on the basis of which I can rely on accommodations but accommodations that are understandable, that are very clearly defined …

Non-disclosure or limited disclosure translated into limited or lack of available support which meant Anne needed to be strategic:

> So, I do a lot of extra work, so I have to work a lot harder, I have to, seek accommodations, I have to be really strategic about stuff. I sort of lie on my CV, basically that's what it comes down to.

‘Being strategic’ is what Anne mentioned several times during the interview which demonstrates the importance of constant negotiating her position and the intersecting identities to get by.

The key difference between British-born disabled KIs and DMs was their approach to rights. Following the Brexit referendum DMs’ attention was directed at securing basic human rights to be allowed to stay and maintain access to healthcare (Duda-Mikulin 2023). Disabled migrants had to be strategic and use their agency to actively navigate through the two worlds and only when they gained enough confidence (e.g. through citizenship acquisition) they demanded more rights/freedoms. The binary rhetoric around worthy-unworthy and deserving versus undeserving and only ‘allowing to stay’ those who fit the former undoubtedly mattered here (cf. Duda-Mikulin, Scullion, and Currie 2020).

For migrants, new illness or disability could be a threat to their migrant status, similar to disclosing an already existing condition, as this can make them unproductive and therefore undesirable persons. A sense of being judged for not meeting the obligations of a ‘good’ migrant was evident. Anne highlighted that as her condition worsens, she chose to hide it and rely on her earlier accomplishments. Being professionally successful before getting ill was somehow protective:

> I was successful before I got really ill, so I have a lot of credits (…) I published, I won an award before I got really ill. So, my position as a comparison is relatively good and I am very empowered.

In both DMs’ and KIs’ interviews, belonging to both migrant and disabled people groups, translated into a more disadvantaged position than if they belonged to ‘just’ one of those groups. Anne underlined similarities between both experiences as they related to the fundamentals of one’s existence:

> This is something where migration and disability sort of intersect but also reinforce each other, is, this fear of … it’s kind of like existential fear in a way, isn’t it, it’s like about … how can I say … where life gets really shitty and tough …

In the analysis, many similarities between being a migrant and a disabled person became apparent (cf. Duda-Mikulin, Scullion, and Currie 2020). Not having their voice heard, having to prove their worth, being subject to hate crime and wider societal stereotypes, ‘othering’ are all parts of the experience of both groups. There was a general agreement that belonging to both of them places individuals at the bottom of the social hierarchy. This finding is particularly interesting as all migrants were highly educated and in relatively secure and skilled employment (cf. Capurri 2018). This did not seem to protect them from internalising the prejudice and attitudes linked to being a disabled migrant suggesting they assume an inferior position in relation to the British-born citizens. Literature implies that this could be linked to structural inequality, experiences of discrimination or microaggressions and negative attitudes from peers, family or society (Bó 2019; Nadal et al. 2021). Internalisation of the unproductive disabled migrant stereotype could also explain the tendency to hide the seen-as-undesirable characteristics, should this be non-disclosing one’s health condition or passing as a native as ways of distancing themselves from negative stereotypes (David 2013).

Negative stereotypes of migrants are exaggerated by negative disability stereotypes. Anne and Harry shared the view that disability is linked to negative stereotypes such as socio-economic disadvantage and a need to rely on social welfare benefits or personal network of support. Harry referred to the stereotype of pity and sympathy attached to disabilities in which disabled people are disadvantaged with regard to access to and position within the paid labour market. Anne highlighted the permanency of the situation:

> (…) a single mother (…) at some point, your children grow up and you might find a job, you become autonomous financially, whereas for a disabled … (…) So there is an idea that it's normal that disabled people are poorer.

Among the issues they face as disabled and/or migrants all interviewees noted a lack of own voice whereby both minority identities are not considered concurrently (Anne, Harry), a risk of ableism and hate crimes (Harry, Olivia, Anne) and negative stereotypes (Olivia, Harry, Anne, AMC). Minority group membership can lead to strong negative sentiments, as Olivia explained: 'If you are both a disabled person and a migrant you will probably in the mind of many people stereotype will be that you will be a waste of space in a way'.

There was a noticeable difference between DMs and a British-born disabled KIs. When KIs focused on their rights and dignity and seeking practical solutions to address barriers they encounter, DMs did not wish to attract attention and seemed to appreciate what they have. They did not want to be seen as a burden and they accepted that they must work much harder for their professional position to be recognised.

KI Alex highlighted another interesting perspective on migrants with invisible disabilities. He found discussing disabled migrants unusual as in his work with migrants, he never met one who self-identified as disabled having an invisible disability:

> First of all, I'm not aware of any European migrant who I've ever met who defines themselves (…) There are disabled people out there who are European nationals, I know. It's hard to find them. (…) I've met people, who you can see visibly are disabled, or they've got a significant visual or hearing impairment, but I've seen some who aren't visibly disabled, who aren't in a wheelchair, who would still define themselves as disabled. Now I've not met any migrants in that category.

## 'An unwanted guest' (AMC), re-establishing oneself in post-Brexit future

As previously noted, this research was carried out after the Brexit referendum but before UK's formal exit from the EU. Issues related to Brexit consumed a large part of the interviews. The third theme focuses on the changes in the interviewees' sense of belonging in the post-Brexit UK, the hierarchy of migrants and changes in their increasingly more vulnerable position in society. The DMs talked about their migration status, what changes are likely for disabled migrants and their thoughts about the future.

The status of a migrant took priority over other identities which was evident through extensive discussions about Brexit. All migrants talked about their attachment to the UK, belonging in the community, being 'adopted British'. They highlighted how Brexit negatively impacted their relationship with the UK, the local community as well as with their British colleagues. They said they felt less welcome, or even not belonging in the UK anymore. AMC explained:

> I felt stabbed in the back, basically.' (…) until then (Brexit) I felt that I was a member of the society, I felt that there was no question about my contribution, I felt I had equal rights, and after the 26th [23rd June 2016]it was like, totally wrong, You misunderstood us, you are just a guest, an unwanted guest. (Laughs)

For CL discovering that the freedom of movement under the EU she took for granted did not apply to many disabled migrants due to the requirement of being either self-sufficient or in paid work was particularly difficult. She expressed a sense of confusion over moving goal posts regarding the application of the regulations.

'An unwanted guest' was the most emotional theme, filled with strong negative feelings. Disabled migrants were in the position of being allowed to stay, being tolerated but with limited/no rights or at risk of losing rights. Inconsistent interpretation of the rules caused confusion and heightened a sense of threat as DMs are a group left behind in the Brexit process while realising that the government could implement new laws which can go against the existing protective measures with regards to migrants' rights (cf. hyper-precarious labour Lewis et al. 2015).

The general atmosphere after Brexit vote could be realized by Olivia's words:

> The last three years has had its challenges. I mean, in particular with my youngest son and probably with the incident [racial hate crime] his sense of belonging has been completely shattered. He's feeling a bit like an alien where he is. … it's heartbreaking

Similarly, all KIs noted difficult and 'fragile' (Alex) situation of EU citizens in the UK following the Brexit vote as Alex posed the following questions:

> What to do with you lot? Do we send you all out in a big boat out to wherever you came from? Do we just have you plonked here or what? What's your status?

A wide range of negative emotions mainly fear, and anger was evident when considering the referendum campaign and the period of negotiations with the EU. This was described in terms such as: being terrified and pissed-off (Anne), feeling uncertainty, having shattered sense of belonging and being uncomfortable (Olivia), lost trust, feeling blamed and cheated and being stabbed in the back (AMC), being cross (CL), not understood (Anne, Olivia), feeling afraid of being kicked out (Anne, AMC). The feelings were primarily directed at the Brexit reality, at British citizens and even at oneself or at non-disabled EU citizens who appeared to lack understanding of the complexity of disabled migrants' situation. Some DMs were considering leaving the UK if the situation worsens as AMC asserted:

> I cannot belong to a society which tolerated me as a guest for all these years. (…) until then (Brexit) (…) I'm not going to be chained to a country that doesn't acknowledge my contribution but take my taxes. (Laughs) By law but you don't know how things can pan out. I don't trust the government.

The interviewees either experienced or knew about hate crimes directed at EU citizens. They occurred when migrants talked in their native language in public (Katarina) or openly expressed their views against Brexit (Olivia), for instance.

An increase in negative attitudes towards migrants and disabled migrants post-2016 was noted, which, in their perception, was not a problem before, as CL concluded 'the thing is in 2016 this totally changed and European citizens became scapegoats'. Some accounts focused on the relatively greater disadvantage of being both a migrant and a disabled person (Alex, Anne) and on the unpredictability of reasons for being scapegoated 'it's basically interchangeable and if it's race, if it's migration status, if it's disabilities, sexual orientation, whatever it is' (CL) and on how toxic this is for society (CL).

The hierarchy amongst migrants of different nationalities and different levels of ability seemed to be one of the central issues in discussions around Brexit. Despite highlighting that all people are the same and equal, DMs showed awareness of a hierarchy of migrants within the UK which was apparent in the interviews. First, the (contested) Western European nationals saw themselves as relatively more desirable and more accepted (which is in line with public attitudes) than Central and Eastern Europeans (Anne, CL). The division goes further with a Southern European (AMC) speaking about xenophobic comments directed at her nationality or accent. Generally, the less one was recognised as a foreigner the better according to the interviewees. Migrants seemed proud to announce that they were often perceived as natives: 'I have never been discriminated, to the contrary; people think I'm British' (Anne) and 'I'm lucky because until I speak people do not know that I'm foreign' (Olivia).

On the other hand, there was a sentiment that after Brexit, EU citizens will drop in the hierarchy of migrants. This division between migrants is seen as purposefully designed by the UK government. Anne shared opinions regarding ethnicity and support for disabled people: 'I think the white British disability movement is just really not interested in non-white disabled people'. Sharing her observations, CL pointed out that scapegoating is a constant process and in the current reality it turned against EU citizens:

> I remember in 2006 when I came, there were a lot of people moaning about the Indians and the Pakistanis so I have a feeling this whole scapegoating attitude shifted from one group of migrants to another one and it is even more so with (…) the Eastern Europeans, the Polish people, they are scapegoat number one. I feel as a [Western European] still very privileged because we are in the group of scapegoats, we are the back-up scapegoats. (laughter) but if you are then from a different European country and you are disabled (…) that's definitely not great.

Lost attachment perpetuates feelings of loss, grief and uncertainty, as migrants lost their adopted home. There was a strong sentiment that Brexit posed an existential threat to EU migrants and even more so to disabled EU migrants. They decided to formalise their stay through obtaining citizenship so that they are protected and retain rights post-Brexit. This could be explained by the concepts of 'unsettling events' and 'temporary ruptures' to which migrants respond by either completing return migrations or acquiring citizenship, for instance (cf. Kilkey and Ryan 2021). Brexit was for them an 'unsettling event' that led to a loss of feelings of belonging in the UK (see literature on 'unbelonging' post-Brexit; Giralt 2020), now they have become 'citizens of nowhere' (Marsili and Milanese 2018). EU citizens in the UK needed to make a decision whether to stay and adjust to the new circumstances or to move again and if so where (Duda-Mikulin 2017). This is consistent with the results of previous studies exploring precarity (Duda-Mikulin 2018), racism and xenophobia (Rzepnikowska 2019), for instance.

The issue of disabled EU migrants' rights was a key focus in CL's interview, who actively engaged in the fight for the rights of this group. According to her, Brexit brought to light how few rights there were in the EU regulation to protect basic human rights of disabled migrants. It became apparent to her that the EU was less of a peace project and more focused on economic outcomes with disabled people not able to benefit equally from freedom of movement. CL highlighted the complexity around inability to prove self-sufficiency or undertaking paid work, for example when a disabled migrant moved to the UK as a child with their parents or an EU citizen was a carer for a disabled spouse/child. CL highlighted a lack of consideration for disabled EU migrants in negotiations between the EU and the UK:

> The European Union (…) during the negotiations, they threw the disabled people under the bus and then the Conservative British Government went and put them under the bus again.

Another issue mentioned in the interviews was that the disabled EU migrants remained out of interest of organisations advocating for the rights of either EU migrants or disabled people, leaving this vulnerable group voiceless and often invisible which was also acknowledged by KI Alex. This kind of 'social blindness' may have severe consequences. If all vulnerabilities of clients of organisations working with either group are not recognised, they cannot be addressed adequately. This in turn could further increase disabled migrants' vulnerable position and foster experiences of marginalisation and exclusion.

The UK's hostile environment approach and 'toxic' rhetoric towards EU migrants already seem to have an effect on the lives of EU citizens, as illustrated by two examples of discrimination against them: withdrawing benefits of someone living in the UK for 30 years given by CL and denying access to free flu vaccination to an entitled person based on the result of the Brexit vote described by AMC. This demonstrated inconsistencies around treatment and a lack of knowledge and awareness of rights and entitlements among local authority representatives. The atmosphere of uncertainty caused significant distress to EU citizens, as AMC explained:

> I'm very scared about the health system and I have several conditions. I have chronic asthma plus, as you know, I developed a blood clot from the flight, and I may have a genetic issue actually. So I could not risk to not have access immediately to services.

and Alex emphasised:

> These are all the difficult questions, so the whole difficulty of homeless people and disabled people who may not now be working because as a result of the significance of their disability or impairment, are they exercising treaty rights? Should they have access to benefits? Now unfortunately because of that Brexit scare, (…), it proved the government was being serious prior to the election (…) there are issues there, it's still hanging around, this exercising treaty rights, how would it be looked upon?

All interviewed EU citizens highlighted that their original nationality and identification with their home country culture were still strong or that these appeared even more important in response to Brexit, despite previously feeling at home in the UK. All but one of the EU citizens confirmed that they had British citizenship at the time of the interviews. The agreement between all of them was that this was treated as an insurance protecting them from being 'forced out' (Olivia) of the UK or from 'getting into troubles' (AMC). Migrants felt it was not entirely their choice but rather a decision made due to the uncertain situation (Olivia) to ensure one's safety (CL), have one's rights protected or to make everyday life easier in post-Brexit UK (Katarina). Citizenship was understood as a proof they belong, they contribute, they are worthy and can stay, amplifying further divides in line with the government's intentions. After obtaining citizenship, two migrants (Olivia and CL) became migrants' rights and disabled peoples' rights activists (respectively). They felt that Brexit forced them to take action, while acquiring British citizenship first secured their future and gave them confidence to fight for the rights of others.

British citizenship was treated by many migrants as insurance, as a way of future-proofing, a strategy to achieve security (Barnard, Fraser Butlin, and Costello 2022; Botterill and Hancock 2019). Then, once migrants 'become British' through citizenship acquisition, they gained confidence and headspace to fight for the rights of others as their lives seemed relatively secure. Despite obtaining British citizenship, or as a way to counter the act which was seen as forced by the situation, migrants' nationality by birth was brought to the fore. Even if they previously felt at home in the UK, after the Brexit referendum due to exclusionary racist rhetoric they felt compelled to reject values of their host country. These experiences are in line with those reported in wider literature (Duda-Mikulin 2019; Ranta and Nancheva 2019; Taylor 2017).

## Conclusion

The data we explore in this paper adds to the insight into the complexity of disabled EU migrants' experiences in the post-Brexit UK. This raises questions about how the themes of migration and disability should be studied in the future to capture this complexity. This is important especially as the existing scholarship mostly refers to disability and forced migrants, whereas as this paper demonstrates, disability is relevant to voluntary/economic migrants too as it does not automatically render a person unproductive or undeserving in line with the forces of global capitalism. Additionally, the provision of appropriate support is critical – practical, legal as well as psychological care relevant to such a diverse group experiencing multiple interlinked issues from legal status, practical matters to psychological concerns. This is while perceptions of own situation differ greatly and so do perspectives of those offering support to this group.

The interviewed disabled migrants demonstrated that their immigration status comes before their disability status and the latter was in each case strongly dependent on the former. Interviews with key informants acknowledged that these two identities are seen as mostly separate for those who work with migrants and disabled people in the UK. Globally, this exacerbates the invisibility of disabled migrants and other highly vulnerable groups. This article contributes to discussions on intersections between migration studies and disability studies in the bid to impulse inclusive theory, policy and practice that will contribute to the inclusion and well-being of disabled migrants. The contradicting stereotypical perceptions of cheap physical migrant labour and disability linked to economic unproductivity, lead to the invisibility of disabled migrants in theory and practice which this paper aims to remedy. A lack of appreciation of intersectionality of both identities may have a detrimental impact on the health, well-being and support available to disabled voluntary migrants worldwide. Practical solutions should be sought to address the impact of being a disabled migrant on one's health and well-being. Organisations that provide support for migrants or disabled people who are focused solely on one minority identity should seek ways to apply an intersectional lens in understanding the complexity of the experience of their service users and tailor support relevant to minority identities specific to each of them.

This paper is an urgent plea for more research and debate on and with disabled migrants, be it voluntary or forced. At the time when, sadly, there are many conflicts in the world that influence the scale of migration as well as rates of disability among those who flee, we should not forget that those who move voluntarily may also have additional needs, existing or acquired en route. Through this paper we wish to continue the debate on inclusivity in migration studies and diversity in disability studies scholarship started by Roberts (2000), Pisani and Grech (2015) and continued by Hughes (2017), Burns (2019) and Yeo (2021). Noteworthy is the need for more research on the themes of migration and disability that focus on voluntary as well as forced migrants and their intersecting identities to continue this much-needed debate. More qualitative as well as quantitative data are needed to redress the invisibility of disabled migrants and gain means to better support them through theory and in practice.

## Notes

1. Hostile environment – this policy was initially aimed at undocumented migrants, those without leave to remain and not aimed at EU migrants advantaged by their EU membership, although this changed in the context of Brexit. In the campaign leading up to the Brexit referendum, anti-immigrant sentiment reached its peak, portraying migrants as undeserving abusers of the British welfare system in an era of austerity (Blachnicka-Ciacek et al. 2021).
2. The EU Settlement Scheme (settled and pre-settled status) https://www.gov.uk/settled-status-eu-citizens-families/applying-for-settled-status.
3. These are pseudonyms chosen by the research participants.
4. The delay in the analysis was caused by two maternity breaks of the researcher who conducted the original study.
5. Fact Sheets on the European Union – European Parliament – Free movement of persons https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/147/free-movement-of-persons.

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