THE IMPOSTER PHENOMENON IN GRADUATE STUDENTS: A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST PERSPECTIVE USING NARRATIVE INQUIRY

Colin Smith

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THE IMPOSTER PHENOMENON IN GRADUATE STUDENTS: A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST PERSPECTIVE USING NARRATIVE INQUIRY

by

Colin J. Smith

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Abstract

A narrative inquiry study explored six graduate students’ experiences of “imposter syndrome” during their graduate studies. Semi-structured interviews occurred with each participant at two time points: one initial interview and a follow-up interview to discuss the impact of the initial interview and to perform member checking. Each interview was analyzed individually to create summative narrative of their unique experiences of imposter feelings. Interviews were also analyzed on a study-wide level to explore common threads of the “imposter syndrome” in graduate school. Results suggested imposter feelings in graduate students were related to the ability to discuss imposter feelings with others, program demographic makeup, and the level of competition and support within a program. Implications and recommendations for further research and graduate programs are provided. Individual and systemic perspectives are discussed.

Keywords: imposter syndrome, narrative inquiry, qualitative interviews
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Introduction

The Imposter Phenomenon in Universities

High achievers commonly feel a deep sense of imposture. Often referred to as imposter syndrome, the imposter phenomenon, or imposterism; the sense of imposture is the subjective feeling that one has deceived those around them to achieve their success (Clance & Imes, 1978; Harvey, 1981). Clance and Imes (1978) published one of the first papers on the imposter phenomenon in which they reflected on what they noticed through individual therapy, growth-oriented groups, and classroom interactions with high achieving women. They described the key factors of imposterism as a subjective feeling of intellectual phoniness characterized by a tendency to attribute one’s success to hard work, luck, or interpersonal resources instead of innate ability, despite examples of success. Expanding on this work, Leary and their coauthors (2000) found three consistent parts of imposter syndrome in the literature: a sense of being an imposter, a fear of being “found out” by others, and difficulty internalizing their successes. More recently, this conceptualization of imposture has been challenged. Breeze and colleagues (2022) argue that the subjective sense of imposterism can be better understood as a systemic issue. Focusing on the “imposter syndrome” as an individual problem risks ignoring systems of exclusions.

While the origins of imposterism (individual vs systemic or a combination of both) are debated, its presence in many work and academic settings is clear. The imposter phenomenon is highly prevalent among graduate students, with many studies reporting rates of severity as high as 30% (Bravata et al., 2019; Bravata et al., 2020; Henning et al., 1998). In a review of 33 articles that compared imposter syndrome between genders, women reported significantly more imposter feelings than men in 16 of the 33 studies; 17 studies found no difference between
genders (Bravata et al., 2019). Additional research has identified minority and first-generation college students as more susceptible to imposter feelings than their White or non-first-generation counterparts (Cokley et al., 2012; Cokley et al., 2017; Canning et al., 2020). Among ethnic-minority students, imposter feelings may be a stronger predictor of psychological wellbeing than minority stress and they may moderate the relationships between discrimination and mental health (Cokley et al., 2012; Cokley et al., 2017).

Among general university samples, imposterism has been found to relate to a host of negative outcomes. For example, higher imposter feelings may predict decreased career planning, career striving, and leadership motivation (Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016). Further, McGregor et al. (2008) found a significant association between imposter feelings and subjective ratings of depression. Individuals who endorse imposter fears may also be more susceptible to the negative impact of subjective failures. In one study, students high in imposter feelings exhibited more anxiety and predicted worse performance before a midterm exam, despite ending up scoring similarly to students low in imposter feelings (Cozzarelli & Major, 1990). Imposterism has also been associated with lower mental well-being, anxiety, and lower self-esteem (Bravata et al., 2019; Cusack et al., 2013).

Theoretical Explanations

Despite its prevalence and impacts, the empirical literature on the imposter phenomenon is somewhat scarce. Early theoretical explanations thus far have largely been based on anecdotal experiences. Clance and Imes (1978) implicated the family environment as crucial in fostering beliefs that were conducive to imposterism as well as societal sex-role competency stereotypes. Indeed, there is some quantitative evidence linking imposter feelings as an adult with childhood familial experiences such as parentification, lack of parental care, parental overprotection, and
parental alcoholism (Castro et al., 2004; Robinson & Goodpaster, 1991; Li et al., 2014). Further, much research has focused on individual level factors to explain imposterism. For example, perfectionism, social support, and self-esteem have been examined as and evidenced to be potential risk factors for imposterism (Caselman et al., 2006, Ferrari & Thompson 2006; Henning et al., 1998; Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016; Schubert & Bowker, 2019; Wang et al., 2019).

Although imposterism has been studied in a variety of workplaces and environments, it has most often been associated with the space of higher education (Bravata et al., 2019). Near the end of the 20th century, western higher education began to incorporate an “audit culture” of quantifying institutional performance and effectiveness and research quality (Shore & Wright, 1999). The use of measurement and comparison aimed to establish accountability for publicly funded institutions to justify their use of resources. However, as Shore and Wright (1999) outlined, the incorporation of audit culture into higher education has led to institutions to viewing academics as units of resources to be managed and “enhanced.” Systems of audit provided top-down standards against which academics evaluated themselves and others. The “quality” of an individual could be evaluated using quantitative measurements (i.e., exam scores, number of publications, etc.).

The presence of cultural phenomena like “audit culture” have motivated scholars in the field to argue that “imposter syndrome” is best understood as systemic issue within higher education rather than as a problem situated within the control of an individual. Stephens et al. (2012) argued that American universities endorsed neoliberal values that promote competition. Neoliberalism is often discussed in larger political contexts to refer to an ideology of free market capitalism associated with increased individual responsibility and reductions in social programs
(Morley, 2024). In higher education, neoliberal ideas may look like cost-cutting, individualism, and an emphasis on measurable productivity. Breeze (2018) highlighted that the focus on competition and productivity within the American system of higher education is conducive to self-other comparisons. It is these self-other comparisons that push students to compare their own internal experience against that which has been modelled for them. Thus, an environment in which students are shown, or share with each other, unrealistic examples of what a student “ought” to be sow the seeds for negative self-other comparisons. Further, Hutchins and Rainbolt (2016) found that academic faculty often attributed experience of imposterism to situations in which they were comparing themselves with their colleagues.

**Attempts to Address Imposterism**

There have been no outcome studies on treatments designed to target imposter feelings (Bravata et al., 2019). However, anecdotal suggestions based on clinical experience have been proposed (Clance & Imes, 1978; Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2016; Langford & Clance, 1993; Mathews & Clance, 1985). In a sample of academic faculty members, participants emphasized how important interpersonal relationships were in reducing imposter feelings (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2016). Further, faculty members recommended that institutions provide opportunities for group discussions about imposter feelings in academia. Various authors on imposterism have recommended designing groups for individuals experiencing imposter feelings to meet and discuss their experiences openly with the goal of normalizing their feelings (Clance & Imes, 1978; Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2016). The suggestions thus far are aligned with recommending interpersonal interventions for what is often considered to be an individual problem. Research situating imposterism as a systemic issue is yet to produce analysis of institutional attempts at reducing imposterism (Siddiqui et al., 2024).
The Current Study

The present study sought to center the experiences of graduate students who endorsed experiencing “imposter syndrome” while also examining their views of their academic contexts. The purpose of the current qualitative narrative inquiry study was to illuminate how graduate students understood their “imposter syndrome” within their self-stories. In particular, how do graduate students experience imposter syndrome and are there particular factors or events that impact these feelings? Further, what is the perceived impact of imposter feelings and what is the impact of discussing one’s “imposter syndrome?” Finally, how do graduate students see their race, gender, and other demographic variables as interacting with their experience of “imposter syndrome?”

Methodology

This study was guided by a narrative inquiry methodology (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). One of the most fundamental pieces of the human experience is story (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). We construct narratives to explain our past, make sense of our present, and predict our future. Kim (2016) proposed that knowledge cannot exist without meaning or narrative. We understand our experience and the actions of others through narratives because they provide us with a method of categorization and organization. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) suggested open ended questions and simple probes were effective for eliciting narratives. The current study focused on how graduate students understood their imposter feelings by using an open, semi-structured interview format.

Narrative inquiry requires additional focus on the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee. The interviewer’s presence alters how the interviewee understands their experiences (Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). The wording of questions, use of
silence, nonverbal behaviors, interviewer self-disclosure, and the interviewer’s visible identities can all impact what is shared. The very act of discussing one’s experiences can lead to new ways of understanding (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The interviewer’s implicit stance impacts how interview responses are understood and represented (Connolly & Reilly, 2007). In this study, the interviewer was seen as an active participant. The resulting narratives were co-authored by the interviewer and interviewees. This study followed Chaveste and colleagues’ (2020) recommendations for relational ethics for qualitative inquiry. Interviewees had a major say in research decisions such as the use of pseudonyms, the time of the interview, the potential for editing what is said, and how the information would be used.

**Theoretical Foundation: Social Constructionism**

This study was guided by a social constructionism framework. This theoretical foundation emphasizes the importance of language as a socially constructed tool to describe subjective experiences (Berger & Luckmann 1966). Within this framework, language is symbolic and everchanging (Burr, 2015a, 2015b; Galbin, 2014). Further, language guides how we make sense of ourselves and our experiences. Finally, social constructionism does not focus on objective reality. Instead, negotiated, socially constructed understandings take priority.

Social constructionism has several key implications for social science research as suggested by Burr (2015b). First, researcher-objectivity is impossible. Instead, the role of the researcher may be best understood as a co-creator of the findings. Second, research participants’ understandings of their experiences are considered valid; the researcher’s summary does not hold an ultimate claim. This requires a collaborative approach in which results and summaries are negotiated with the participants. Finally, all knowledge is context-dependent and contestable.
Thus, whenever possible, researchers have an obligation to provide information on their and the participants’ social context.

Graduate students live and work within a social context. Students often have frequent contact with other graduate students within a graduate program that influenced by the unique features of the local institution and the larger culture of higher education. One’s definition of what it means to be a “good” or “real” graduate student has been impacted by each of these social layers. Thus, the definition to which one compares themselves is the product of their interaction with the world around them. Social constructionism provides a useful framework for considering how social interactions may impact imposter feelings.

Method

Participants

Six graduate students enrolled at a large, mid-south university were interviewed for this study. This sample size is consistent with previous qualitative research demonstrating 6-12 participants were often sufficient to achieve data saturation (Beitin, 2012; Fusch & Ness, 2015). Ssaturatuton was reached at six participants as evidenced by reoccurring data and information in interviews as well as interested additional participants endorsing similar experiences. Two students were enrolled in PhD programs in STEM, two were enrolled in PhD programs in the humanities, and two were enrolled in master’s programs in the social sciences.

Recruitment

The researcher initially attempted to recruit participants by writing to members of the graduate student association at the university. After not receiving any interest, the researcher reached out to individual graduate programs. Each graduate program was sent an example recruitment email and asked for permission to contact students in that program. Programs were
not included if the researcher had previous relationships with students in those programs. Once permission was granted by the program, recruitment emails were sent individually to the students or via a listserv. Once sufficient participants were gathered, additional respondents were informed that the study had already finished recruitment. Participants who expressed interest via email completed a phone screener before scheduling initial and follow-up virtual interviews. Inclusion criteria included currently being enrolled in a graduate program, endorsing experiencing imposter syndrome related to graduate work at some point in their studies, and being fluent in English. Participants were excluded if denied experiencing imposter syndrome, had a previous relationship with the researcher, attended a program within the same department as the researcher, or were unwilling to be recorded during interviews. There were twelve total responses to the recruitment emails. Two did not follow up with the phone screen inquiry, one decided not to proceed after learning more about the interview process, and three were turned away after saturation. Each participant chose their own pseudonym.

The Interviews

Data were collected during 4 phases; phone screens, the initial interviews, follow-up interviews, and review of final narratives. The phone screens were used to ensure that participants were willing to share experiences that fit broadly into the field’s conceptualization of imposterism and that they understood and were willing to participate in the interviews. All interviews were conducted on Zoom. Initial interviews were semi-structured, guided by initial set questions and lasted approximately 90 minutes and followed a narrative interview format. The shortest interview was around 50 minutes and the longest was around 110 minutes. The interviewer used open ended questions, reflections, probes, and silence to elicit in-depth stories about specific events and experiences. Participants were asked to share stories that demonstrated
how they became aware of their sense of imposterism, what events had major impacts on their imposter feelings and how their sense of imposterism as a graduate student fit into their larger story of self. Interviewees were also asked about what beliefs they had about what made a “real” graduate student and what influenced those beliefs. Interviews were focused on discussing interviewees’ own, nuanced personal experiences instead of trying to uncover some universal truths about imposterism. After the first interview, an initial transcript of the audio recording was generated by Zoom. Interviews transcripts were then edited to capture meaning instead of a linguistic analysis (i.e., “umms,” “errs,” etc. were removed). During the transcription process, quotes that stood out to the researcher as summative or illustrative of their experiences were identified and collected into a document specific to each interview.

Between one-two months after the initial interviews, participants were invited to complete a 30-minute follow-up interview. During this second interview, participants were provided with a summary of the data collected from the initial interview. The researcher reviewed the list of quotes from the transcripts with each participant. Participants were given a chance to add to the summary information provided and edit or redact any of the quotes listed. Interviewees also reflected on the interview process and how their imposter feelings have changed since the initial interview. One purpose of the second interview was to ensure the portrayals of interviewee’s experiences were congruent with their lived experiences. Interviewees were given a chance to identify aspects of their narratives that they wanted highlighted or emphasized. Each interviewee was given the opportunity to make adjustments to the final narratives.

**Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity**
There have already been many authors who have written bravely and eloquently on the topic of imposter syndrome. I began my study on the topic of imposter syndrome somewhat naively. I was guided by my own experiences and knew little of the critical work already done on the topic. Since entering higher education, I have rarely felt excluded based on my identities. I run the risk of ignoring the real social and historical forces of exclusion in higher education because I do not have to face them in the same way as others. Doing this research has put me in contact with graduate students who do not share the same privileged identities as I do. Each participant shared with me vulnerable details of their life as graduate students. My aim of this paper is to amplify their voices and highlight what work has already been done on the topic. I do not seek to make any claims of the universality and I do not want to use “imposter syndrome” in a way that lessens the experiences of excluded and marginalized students. I also acknowledge the position I take in this space as a White man, which limits my ability to understand the lived social experiences that have caused countless high achieving women and people of color to feel a sense of unbelonging. Finally, my how I showed up in the interviews almost certainly impacted what was shared. How I present may have altered how comfortable participants felt sharing vulnerable details of their experiences.

**Method of Analysis**

During a qualitative research interview, the processes of conducting the interview and analyses work in tandem. This study employed a narrative analysis (Clandinin, 2006). Narrative analysis is a flexible approach to qualitative data analyses which centers field texts (i.e., interview transcripts) with a focus on sociality, continuity, and place. The goal of this analysis was to create narratives that accurately and concisely portrayed key events in the participants’ experiences of imposterism.
This study followed Kvale and Brinkmann’s (2009) six steps for analyzing interview data. The first two steps involved the participants sharing their stories and discovering new relationships between their experiences without interpretations offered by the interviewer. This was accomplished by asking open-ended questions and giving the interviewees space to share their experiences. The third step is what Kvale and Brinkmann (2009, p. 195) referred to as a “self-correcting” interview. During the interviews, the interviewer gave reflections and summary statements of what they had heard the interviewee say, allowing for edits and corrections. This led to a real-time process of interpretation and clarification. At the end of the interview, the interviewer gave a general summary of the key narratives they heard during the interview. The fourth step of analysis occurred after the initial interviews, when the interviewer reviewed the interviews and generated transcripts of the interviews. The researcher made notes in the transcripts to identify key events and similarities/differences from other interviewers. During step five, interviewees were reinterviewed and given a chance to correct summaries of their experiences and quotes from the first interview. In the sixth step, the interviewer reviewed the responses, transcripts, and analysis to create the final research product, considering recommendations from the interviewees on how they wanted their stories presented. Final narratives were emailed individually to each interviewee in a password protected document for final member checking. No final edits were suggested from participants.

Results

This narrative inquiry was not designed for the results to be universal and generalizable. However, there were some notable commonalities among the initial interviews. Primarily, imposter feelings tended to thrive in silence. Imposterism was not something regularly discussed in the interviewee’s graduate programs. For some interviewees, their programs just were not
conducive to that kind of personal disclosure between students. For others, they decided to keep their feelings to themselves and a few chosen confidants due to fear of the information negatively affecting their academic career. As one interviewee described, “there’s a fear. You don’t want to be vulnerable with people that you feel might take this information and use it against you.” While identifying how one might weaponize disclosure of vulnerable feelings varied among the participants, the overall sense was that saying you felt like an imposter, was almost as good as overtly stating “I am an imposter.” However, those who did discuss their imposter feelings with others described it as being normalizing and unifying.

Interviewees were asked what they thought defined a “real” graduate student. Every response given to this question suggested that a “real” graduate student possessed some trait they did not or did something that the interviewee struggled to do. For the student who felt like she was always finishing assignments at the last minute, a “real” graduate student would finish all their work ahead of time. For the student who described himself as having issues with work ethic, a “real” graduate student would do all the suggested work/readings in addition to all the required work. When asked what may have contributed to their ideas of a “real” graduate student, most interviewees noted observing other graduate students in their program who appeared to “have it together” or not be struggling in the same ways. Some interviewees reported individual factors that they felt contributed to their imposter feelings (i.e., holding self to a high standard).

Nikki, Situating “Imposter Syndrome” in Context

Nikki is a White, queer, cisgender, female student completing her PhD in the arts and humanities. She was first exposed to the phrase “imposter syndrome” during her master’s program. She and another graduate student were completing work for their assistantship together
when her colleague left the office, citing feeling “imposter syndrome,” leaving Nikki to finish the work without her help. Nikki recounted, “I remember thinking ‘oh I don’t ever want to have imposter syndrome because it seemed like a weak thing.’” Despite her best efforts, Nikki experienced imposterism throughout graduate school, often in the form of self-doubt. For example, when applying to her PhD program, she imagined the committee reading her application and laughing and saying among themselves “who told her she could do this?”

Nikki’s relationship with “imposter syndrome” started to change during her doctoral coursework when it was brought up during a class discussion focused on social constructions of race. Nikki recalled realizing, “‘imposter syndrome’ is this term that is used to keep women, and specifically women of color, in this idea that they’re the issue ... when in reality, it’s the system they’re working in that’s causing them to have doubts.” Through these discussions, she shifted her understanding of “imposter syndrome” from a sign of individual weakness to the result of a systemic issue; “imposter syndrome is never about a person experiencing it. It’s always about the context they’re in.”

Nikki experienced her graduate school environment as perilous and competitive. As a graduate student, when things go wrong, it can feel like, “how am I going to get through this semester?” And because of this environment, “grad students can go from kind and supportive to drawing lines in the sand; we have to self-protect.” Graduate students “perform support of each other. And yet, when push comes to shove, we’re competing with each other.”

**Matthew’s Untestable Hypothesis**

Matthew is a White, cisgender, male student completing his PhD in a STEM field. Matthew’s interview focused on the difficulty he faced completing some of the qualifying exams required for progressing in the program. Early in the Covid pandemic, Matthew took his first
qualifying exam which he “barely passed” according to messaging he received from faculty. After getting this feedback, he couldn’t shake the feeling that the faculty had given him leniency due to Covid. Later in his program, Matthew took a second qualifying exam which he passed conditionally on a second attempt. These challenges led Matthew to wonder, “am I here because of my ability or potential? Or am I here because I’ve been here long enough, and the department doesn’t want to lose a PhD student?” These were not thoughts that Matthew noticed during his undergraduate studies.

These doubts persisted through his program as Matthew looked around at his peers who didn’t seem to be having the same difficulties as him. These feelings generalized to his job as a tutor, an activity Matthew enjoyed except for when he had to help a student with classes that he hadn’t taken in a few years. In these cases, he would often need to review the material in the textbook. From Matthew’s perspective, “the other tutors didn’t seem to have that problem; they just knew everything already and had it all remembered.” For Matthew, these feelings did not begin to dissipate until he was doing research later in his PhD program.

Matthew described the social environment of his program as cordial. Students would sometimes share if they had struggles in a particular class but never were struggling with the program as a whole. Imposter feelings were not something Matthew heard discussed in his program and not something he shared with others. Because of the specifics of his experiences with the qualifying exams and the lack of discussion of self-doubt among his classmates, Matthew felt that his experiences were unique to him.

**Kim, the Relief of Learning of “Imposter Syndrome”**

Kim is a cisgender, female Korean international student completing her PhD in a STEM field. Kim’s interview focused on the cultural expectations she felt while a student in Korea and
how they influenced her imposter feelings. Before coming to the United States for her PhD program, Kim had completed all of her schooling in Korea. Kim described the academic environment in Korea as high pressure, perfectionistic, and highly competitive. “That's the kind of environment that we are studying in Korea. I think that affects students, making them feel that they are not successful, even though they are doing great.”

Kim’s transition to her PhD program was difficult as she moved to a new country during the Covid pandemic. She didn’t have any friends yet in her program, she was far away from her family and support in Korea, and she was still not yet fluent in English, “I didn’t have someone who I could talk with; I didn’t have enough support.” Despite various academic achievements, receiving grants, and progressing in her studies, she still felt like she was doing something wrong. “When I was awarded the grants, it didn’t feel like an achievement. It felt like everyone is doing that and everyone can do that. I’m not really qualified; it was luck.”

It wasn’t until later in her program, when talking to her roommate, that Kim learned of the term “imposter syndrome.” At first, she was hesitant to endorse the label; “imposter syndrome means that you are qualified, but you feel like you aren’t ... so it’s hard to say I’m having imposter syndrome because I do not feel qualified enough.” After some time, Kim eventually found the concept of “imposter syndrome” to be a helpful way of labeling her experiences. “Before, I could define myself as ‘not self-confident,’ or ‘not good enough.’ ... But imposter syndrome is a more neutral term I could use to define myself.”

**Camille, the Isolation of Dissertation**

Camille is a Black, cisgender, female student finishing her PhD in the arts and humanities. Throughout her program, Camille felt doubt about her ability to complete it. “I know I can do this. But in my head, I always have these doubts ... you’re always waiting for the other
shoe to drop ... everyone's going to say, ‘we knew it, we knew you couldn’t do it.’” As Camille progressed in her program, she noticed the feelings getting more intense. “With coursework and comprehensive exams, you have these guidelines ... and now I’m just kind of alone with my dissertation.” Camille recounted her friend once telling her, “Once you get to the dissertation phase, it’s gonna be so isolating.” Being on her own, with less guidelines and structures, Camille noticed more self-doubting thoughts, “Can I really do this? Will people like it? Is the work important enough? Will people care?” Camille found that the pressures and deadlines of working on her dissertation were overwhelming and made it tougher to maintain connection with others.

Camille communicated her imposter feelings to carefully chosen friends in and out of the program. She found many of her friends in graduate school had experienced similar feelings which helped her feel “less alone in this thinking.” The high prevalence of these feelings among her friends led her to wonder about how the context of graduate school may facilitate these feelings. “I think being in this academia space unfortunately fosters this environment for you to constantly doubt yourself ... It’s just an environment where we’re constantly judging ourselves.”

Marie, the Importance of Support

Marie is a White, cisgender, female student earning a master’s degree in the social sciences. As a part of her program, she did some work in her field at a community site. Marie noticed her imposter feelings in earnest for the first time at this site. The site hosted her and other graduate students from other academic programs as well. Early on in her time at the site, Marie started to feel different from the other students. “They had more experience than me ... I just kind of felt not as prepared as they did.” The other students seemed to be more knowledgeable and outspoken in meetings. Marie started to doubt her belongingness at the site and worried staff at the site would see her as an imposter. “I didn’t really feel worthy to be at the site I was at ...
What if people find out that I don’t belong here?” Eventually Marie shared her feelings with a staff member she was close to at her site. The staff member normalized her feelings and shared that they felt similarly at that point in their training. For Marie, this support from staff was crucial. “They made me feel welcomed and not as inadequate.” Since receiving that feedback and continued support, Marie’s imposter feelings have continued to decrease.

Anna, “There’s Not a Lot of People Who Look Like Me”

Anna is a Hispanic, cisgender, female student completing her master’s degree in the social sciences. She first noticed feeling like an imposter after starting graduate school. Anna was surprised to even get accepted into her master’s program. When completing online discussion board assignments, Anna’s classmates seemed to have less trouble understanding the material than she did. “I’m just sitting here like ‘I should know this.’ I feel like a fraud.” Anna would sometimes silence herself during in-class discussion as well. “And sometimes I even know the answer. I just don’t answer because it’ll probably be wrong.” As Anna progressed through her program and got experience in the field, she noticed her imposter feelings starting to decrease. She learned about the term “imposter syndrome” from a social media page for graduate students and found the term to be normalizing. “It made me feel better about myself to know I wasn’t alone in this.”

Anna spoke on how her identity as a Hispanic woman contributed to her feeling “other.” “There’s not a lot of people that look me in my program.” This sense of being different made it difficult for Anna to reach out to other classmates about her imposter feelings. The program did not have “many other Hispanic women that would understand my situation... I didn’t really have anyone to relate to at the time.” Anna described the experience as isolating.

The Interviewing Experience
Interviewees shared a range of reactions to the interviewing process. In general, interviewees reflected on the interview as a positive experience. For Camille and Nikki, discussing their experiences in detail helped them contextualize their imposter feelings in the larger system of academia. During the interviews, they started to shift the focus from the individual to the context that fosters the feelings. As Camille succinctly stated, “imposter syndrome is not real ... the environment of graduate school assists us in this delusion of imposter syndrome.” For Nikki, reflecting on her quotes from the first interview reinforced feelings she had about the correlation between not being taken care of by a graduate program and feeling like an imposter.

Matthew and Anna both spoke about the normalizing experience of talking about their imposter feelings. As Matthew shared, “I’m realizing that [imposter syndrome] is a broader issue.” Anna noted how it felt relieving to know she wasn’t the only one experiencing it. Discussing her imposterism motivated her “to not be afraid to speak up and ask more questions.” Marie and Kim reported that they learned more about “imposter syndrome” and better understood their experiences through the interviews.

Discussion

This qualitative narrative analysis sought to add to the literature on imposterism in higher education by exploring key events that graduate students associated with their own feelings of imposterism. Although the interviews were focused on individual events, interviewees reported some similar aspects of their imposterism experiences during the interviews. One common thread was that imposter feelings tended to fester in silence. Many interviewees spoke of the impact of speaking about their imposterism, whether with friends or during the interview process. This finding is consistent with a common recommendation in the literature of creating
spaces to encourage open discussion of imposterism (Clance & Imes, 1978; Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2016; Matthews & Clance, 1985). As many of the participants in this study reported, the interview process itself was alleviating. In Lane’s (2015) inquiry with early career professionals, participants also described feeling relieved to learn they were not alone in their imposter feelings.

Most interviewees believed initially that their imposter feelings were caused by a combination of systemic and individual factors. Individual factors reported were consistent with previous research suggesting links between imposters and perfectionism and social support (Caselman et al., 2006; Henning et al., 1998; Wang et al., 2019). Interviewees also cited cultural variables and being a part of an ethnic minority group as impacting their imposterism (Cokley et al., 2017). However, unlike the findings of previous research no participants explicitly discussed their parenting as impacting their imposter feelings (Castro et al., 2004; Li et al., 2014; Sonnack & Towell, 2001). Like Camille and Nikki’s interviews, some of the participants in Lane’s (2015) study also questioned the validity of “imposter syndrome” after discussing it in depth. Perhaps feeling like an imposter is not a “syndrome,” but the natural response to the current academic space. Many participants described an academic environment that was competitive, isolating, and facilitative of social comparisons. Neoliberal ideas of independence and productivity engender an unachievable idea of what a “real” graduate student is (Breeze, 2018). Interviewees described “real” graduate students as highly productive, always prepared, and high achieving. These ideas may have been influenced by western higher education’s audit culture quantification of productivity (Morris et al., 2022).

Ideas of what constitute a “real” academic extend beyond productivity. Higher education contains a history of exclusion based on race, gender, income, religion, and other
factors (Breeze et al., 2022). Looking at the pictures of famous researchers in textbooks or looking at the names of academic buildings portrays a predominantly straight, White, male, neurotypical, western picture of academia. These larger symbols convey implicit messages of who belongs and who doesn’t, just like how individual program contains their own messages of who belongs to be there. To discuss “imposter syndrome” as a personal issue that can be experienced by anyone turns a blind eye to the norms that remain in academia of what it means to be a “real” graduate student.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. Although some anecdotal suggestions can be drawn from the narratives, the structure of the study limits generalizability of results. This is added to by the relatively small sample size. The semi-structured nature of the interviews also increased the risk of researcher bias influencing the results. The potential of researcher bias was partially addressed using several instances of member-checking. However, in a semi-structured narrative interview format, the researcher’s views are inseparable from the results as the interviewer is a co-construct of the narratives. This study prioritized specificity and, in turn, sacrificed some generalizability.

Implications and Suggestions

One recurring theme from this study was the importance of having a space to discuss imposter feelings. As participants in this study noted, even participating in the interviewing process impacted their relationship to their imposter feelings. Previous research has highlighted the efficacy of longer form narrative therapy designed to help participants reauthor their self-stories. (Etchinson & Kleist, 2000). Future research may investigate the impact of a one-time long-form narrative interview on imposter feelings.
Some participants spoke the impact that not feeling represented in their program had on their feeling of imposterism. Historically academic spaces have promoted norms of maleness and Whiteness and may unintentionally continue to do so (Breeze et al., 2022). Mullangi and Jagsi (2019) emphasized the importance of having equitable representation of genders and minorities in visible leadership positions as a potential systems level intervention for imposterism. Programs should continue and enhance efforts to promote hiring practices that are conducive to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Previous authors have consistently written on the observed and potential benefits of having groups for individuals to share their imposter feelings (Clance & Imes, 1978; Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2016; Matthews & Clance, 1985). What that looks like in practice for a graduate program is complicated. As some interviewees discussed, it can be difficult to feel that academic faculty can be trusted with vulnerable self-disclosure. Further, the time constraints of graduate school could make an optional group seem like an additional burden. The burden should not fall on graduate students to create a safe academic space, nor should they be expected to spontaneously share vulnerable feelings with faculty and others who have yet to earn their trust.

Institutional level trainings on imposterism may focus on increasing awareness of correlates, prevalence, and impact. Trainings could also cover how to appropriately discuss imposter feelings with students. Graduate programs may want to consider explicitly naming and normalizing imposter feelings in higher education (Siddiqui et al., 2024). Graduate faculty should also examine their implicit and explicit messaging of what it looks like to be a productive and successful graduate student. Graduate programs should seek to ensure the discourse within their program contains realistic examples of being “successful” that are not based around solely productivity (Burr, 2015b).
Academic faculty should also be mindful of how audit culture is incorporated into their program and how it may be affecting participants in an academic program. Often, academic faculty have limited control of the institutional auditing policies. As best they can, programs should ensure their gatekeeping procedures are thoroughly thought through and necessary. Faculty may also want to be as transparent as possible with students about institutional auditing procedures and normalize the reality of imposter feelings within higher education.
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