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A FEW KIND, BUT TRUE WORDS: USING THE RESEARCH CONSULTATION TO EMPOWER MARGINALIZED GRAD STUDENTS STRUGGLING WITH IMPOSTER SYNDROME

V. DOZIER

The University of San Diego (USD) is a private, contemporary Catholic, predominantly White institution (PWI) in San Diego, California, with approximately 9,000 undergraduate, graduate, and professional students. USD's estimated master's and doctoral student tuition is about \$51,000 annually. The School of Leadership and Educational Sciences (SOLES) services approximately 1,000 graduate students. SOLES' demographics and diversity statistics largely reflects USD's racial, ethnic, and other demographics, except for its Education for Social Justice (SJEd) education specialist and doctoral program, the most racially and ethnically diverse program at SOLES. This description provides context for both the assumed and real privilege at USD, in which graduate students are assumed to be White, Catholic, heteronormative, with upper middle class or higher socioeconomic status. However, in programs like SJEd, those assumed privileges are more likely to be false. The SJEd students frequently interact with the education librarian in research consultations, courses, and assistantship assignments and regularly displayed imposter syndrome behavior. The education librarian's observations of the SJEd students and their vocalized experiences of otherness and imposter feelings formed the foundation of this research project.

It is within this context one can begin to think about the privileged image of USD and other academic institutions. This paper also asks one to consider diversity beyond race, ethnicity, gender identity, or sexual orientation: also consider graduate students that may identify as a religious minority, insecurely housed, formerly incarcerated, etc. If we as librarians and library workers claim to support student success and want to empower students to be their full, authentic selves, then we should be intentional about developing and using strategies to support them. For librarians, the research

consultation can provide one space in which to empower marginalized graduate students with some kind, but true words.

IMPOSTER SYNDROME BACKGROUND

In 1978, psychologists Pauline Pose Clance and Suzanne Imes coined the term "impostor phenomenon" to describe the observed impostor feelings experienced by highly achieving academic and professional women in their practice. Clance and Imes (1978) state:

However, despite their earned degrees, scholastic honors, high achievement on standardized tests, praise and professional recognition from colleagues and respected authorities, these women do not experience an internal sense of success. They consider themselves to be "impostors." Women who experience the impostor phenomenon maintain a strong belief that they are not intelligent; in fact they are convinced that they have fooled anyone who thinks otherwise. (p. 1)

Clance and Imes observed women experienced imposter feelings more than men, acknowledging that social structures and gender norms may contribute to why women are more prone to imposter feelings despite all indicators of success otherwise (1978, p. 2). They also cited scholarship on the topic of success attribution, which found that women tend to attribute success the temporary luck, effort, or someone else's effort, whereas men tend to cite ability as the foundation of their success (1978, pp. 2-3). Nearly ten years later, Clance and O'Toole (1987) cited structured interview and questionnaire studies published from 1979 to 1985 finding that men experience imposter feelings as much or more so than women, though women were more like to verbalize the feelings openly (p. 2). Men, in contrast, were more likely to express imposter

feelings in “an anonymous and confidential setting” (Clance & O’Toole, 1987, p. 2).

In 1993, Langford and Clance published a literature review in *Psychotherapy* of imposter phenomenon research, theories, therapeutic strategies, instruments, and implications published since Clance and Imes’ 1978 seminal publication in *Psychotherapy Theory, Research and Practice*. The literature review establishes a clear psychological interest in exploring gender dichotomies, attribution theories, and achievement measures amongst populations like college students, educators, and professionals (Langford & Clance, 1993). While the review covers a number of studies exploring the impact of individual behavior, family impact, and gender on imposter phenomenon, the review fails to mention any studies that discuss the implications of historically marginalized identities on imposter syndrome experiences.

There is a long history of scholars considering the impact of imposter syndrome on those with marginalized identities. Harvey (1981) contradicts early research finding noticeable impact of race and sex on imposter experiences with their findings that the differences are indicators of self-perceived atypicality. Harvey’s work is itself atypical of numerous studies finding people with marginalized identities are more likely to experience imposter feelings related to their sense of “otherness” (Cokley et al., 2013; Gardner & Holley, 2011; Peteet et al., 2015; Pulliam & Gonzalez, 2018; Simon, 2020; Trotman, 2009). Frances Trotman, a scholar of African American women’s counseling and therapeutic practices, states, “Black women in the United States have experienced the imposter phenomenon by virtue of being both black people in white America and women in a male-dominated culture” (2009, p. 78). Mullangi and Jagsi (2019) discuss the pervasiveness of imposter syndrome amongst medical professionals and graduate students, including “how the syndrome disproportionately affects women and minority groups—who often lack sufficient role models of success” (p. 403).

Research on the imposter behaviors and challenges of graduate students with marginalized identities seems most plentiful post-2000, in which the percentages of minorities pursuing and conferred graduate degrees shows significant growth (Cokley et al., 2013; Gardner & Holley, 2011; Parkman, 2016; Simon, 2020). Recent National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data indicates degrees conferred by race and ethnicity between academic years 2000 and 2016:

- Hispanic students – master’s degree – increased 191% ; doctoral degree – increased 126%
- Black students – master’s degree – increased 129% ; doctoral degree – increased 90%
- Asian & Pacific Islander students – master’s degree – 87% ; doctoral degree – increased 69%
- American Indian & Alaska Native students – master’s degree – increased 42% ; doctoral degree – increased 15% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).

The increased enrollment of racial and ethnic minorities in graduate and professional programs may provide a sense of improvement. In reality, racial, ethnic, sexual or other minorities are still greatly outnumbered by those identifying as White male or female, heterosexual, or Judeo-Christian at a PWI. This can increase the chances graduate students with marginalized identities may experience imposter feelings. Parkman (2016) discusses imposter phenomenon’s ability to “negatively impact an organization’s ability to retain students, faculty, and staff alike” and “understanding imposter phenomenon can be very helpful in identifying those at risk for leaving” (p. 51). The work of Cokley et al., (2013) found imposter feelings was the strongest indicator for Minority Student Status Stress, psychological stress and psychological well-being for African American, Asian, and Latino students at PWIs (p.89).

IMPOSTER SYNDROME BEHAVIORS & COMPETENCE TYPES

Those struggling with imposter syndrome exhibit one or more of a pattern of behaviors. One of the key findings of the Clance and O’Toole study states, “IP sufferers do not have a realistic sense of their own competence and are *not* fully empowered to internalize their strengths, accept their deficits, and function with joy. If impostor feelings are intense, IP sufferers may turn down opportunities to advance” (1987, p. 3). Other scholars observed similar behaviors with participants describing career setbacks, failure to advocate or accept opportunities or promotions, and downplaying or guilt about success (Clance & Imes, 1978; Langford & Clance, 1993; Mullangi & Jagsi, 2019).

In *The Secrets Thoughts of Successful Women: Why Capable People Suffer from Impostor Syndrome and How to Thrive in Spite of It*, Valerie Young organizes imposter behaviors into five competency types: the perfectionist, expert, soloist, natural genius, and superwoman/superman/super student. The competency types can help librarians quickly identify if their graduate student is exhibiting imposter behaviors and help discern strategies to empower the student. They describe the types as:

- The **Perfectionist**’s primary focus is on “how” something is done. This includes how the work is conducted and how it turns out. One minor flaw in an otherwise stellar performance or 99 out of 100 equals failure and thus shame.
- The **Expert** is the knowledge version of the Perfectionist. Here, the primary concern is on “what” and “how much” you know or can do. Because you expect to know everything, even a minor lack of knowledge denotes failure and shame.
- The **Soloist** cares mostly about “who” completes the task. To make it on the achievement list, it has to be you and you alone. Because you think you need to do

and figure out everything on your own, needing help is a sign of failure that evokes shame.

- The **Natural Genius** also cares about “how” and “when” accomplishments happen. But for you, competence is measured in terms of ease and speed. The fact that you have to struggle to master a subject or skill or that you’re not able to bang out your masterpiece on the first try equals failure which evokes shame.
- The **Superwoman/Superman/Super Student** measures competence based on “how many” roles they can both juggle and excel in. Falling short in any role—as a parent, partner, on the home-front, host/hostess, friend, volunteer—all evoke shame because they feel they should be able to handle it all—perfectly and easily. (Young, n.d.)

Gardner and Holly (2011) observed significant imposter syndrome behaviors exhibited by racial and ethnic minorities in the first-generation doctoral student population. They quote a Black doctoral student named Brandy discussing the lack of belongingness, “I’m here but I really don’t belong in terms of class, in terms of gender, in terms of race, I don’t belong” (p. 85). Ryan, a Black doctoral student, expressed the challenges as, “Those invisible barriers are real. People can’t see them, but they’re real” (p.77). Similarly Cokely et al. (2013) imply how otherness and pervasive negative stereotypes adversely impact Black students’ ability to adjust to PWIs more in comparison to other ethnic minorities (p. 90). They also found Asian American experience impostor syndrome at higher rates than Black or Latino(a) American students due to “the cultural pressures of high parental expectations and the unique stressor of being the model minority” and are more likely to exhibit perfectionist tendencies despite overall positive academic stereotypes (Cokley et al., 2013, p. 91).

THE EMPOWERING RESEARCH CONSULTATION

Over the years, I adapted recommendations and strategies from imposter phenomenon research, marginalized populations research, higher education and academic library research, and my own observations to incorporate intentional checkpoints to empower marginalized graduate students as they struggle through impostor syndrome, minority stress, library anxiety, and a host of other challenges. Gregory and Higgins argue that librarians, when applying a critical perspective in their work, consider the historical, cultural, social, economic, and political forces that interact with information in order to critique, disrupt, and interrogate these forces (Gregory & Higgins, 2013, as cited in Garcia, 2015). As a Black female academic librarian in a predominately White field working at a PWI, my critical librarianship efforts are intentional acts to help shape a genuinely inclusive and supportive higher education environment, particularly for marginalized students, faculty, and staff.

Garcia states, “Information is not neutral, thus the way that information is presented by librarians adds meaning and context for students. There is a power and privilege in the ways in which information is presented and processed by instructors and students” (2015, para. 3). Research consultations present academic librarians with the opportunity to engage graduate students in one-on-one or small group learning. Lee (2004) states, “The goal of the research consultation service is to empower the client with both the skills necessary to accomplish his or her research objective and to educate the client on information resources available in both print and electronic formats” (p. 170). My research consultations range from thirty minutes to an hour, with the first five to ten minutes dedicated to check-ins in which we chat about recent events, challenges, and presents the first opportunity to empower the student with my genuine interest in their well-being and interests. Throughout the consultation, I pause to check for understanding and empower my students to critically think about their project and the support or challenges they face. My graduate students often engaged in personal, self- or community-reflective research, and those with marginalized identities express more concern about the potential impact of their work on the communities. With marginalized graduate students, I have observed it is even more important to affirm their interests and build rapport and trust before providing constructive feedback because their interests are more likely to be personally important to them. Imposter syndrome can add an extra barrier to the students feeling empowered to pursue or stick with their topics or populations of interest, especially if the topics are not considered research-worthy or interesting to the White faculty or their White graduate peers.

Sample strategies for observed impostor syndrome intervention points and kind words to use:

- **Perfectionist** fretting about APA formatting mistakes—Remind them *everyone* makes formatting errors and citation styles are constantly evolving to acknowledge new or different resources. Affirm correct examples to demonstrate success.
- **Expert** apologizing for lack of knowledge about a minority-focused research theory, framework, or methodology (e.g., intersectionality, critical Latinx/o/a theory, or critical Indigenous methodologies)—Discuss the prioritization of Western, White, English-language, and often male-dominated resources and the underrepresentation of non-Western, White, English-language, or male resources. Become more familiar with minority-centering resources so that one is ready to support student information needs.
- **Soloist** hesitant to collaborate with group project for fear of being labeled intellectually inferior to their peers—Remind them they are all graduate students in positions of learning and growing. Ask the student to consider what strengths they bring to the group dynamic.

- **Natural Genius** refusing to accept a research opportunity for fear of failure—Offer to provide research support and sessions to discuss research concerns that the student may feel uncomfortable revealing to supervising faculty. As confidence builds, point out success and growth points.
- **Superwoman/Superman/Super Student** overwhelmed with academic and research projects for fear of being stereotyped lazy or unworthy—Acknowledge their struggle and offer strategies to prioritize project on a research agenda. Remind them that everything does not have to happen simultaneously to prove worthiness.

CONCLUSION

Studies have shown that imposter syndrome impacts people across ages, races, ethnicities, socioeconomic status, and other identities, and those with traditionally marginalized identities are more prone to experience negative effects in White or male-dominated environments. Some higher education institutions have implemented or are developing programs to address campus climate, belongingness, imposter feelings, and other issues for students, faculty, and staff. Academic librarians are in a unique position to address graduate student's imposter feelings in the research consultation, by adding empowering intervention points when imposter behaviors are observed. Infusing critical librarianship with cultural competency, anti-bias, and anti-racism strategies can help academic librarians be better prepared to recognize and address the nuances of how and why graduate students with marginalized identities experience imposter syndrome. Thus, we can provide better academic and research support to these students.

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