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# What am I doing in a place like this?: Understanding Imposter Phenomenon amongst postgraduate students from minoritised racial backgrounds

## Abstract

Imposter phenomenon (IP) involves experiencing persistent feelings of perceived insufficiency and fraudulence despite contrary evidence of objective success or accomplishment. The aim of this research was to explore factors which may trigger or maintain feelings of imposterism in postgraduate students from minoritised racial backgrounds and investigate students' perspectives of what Higher Education institutions could do to help prevent or reduce IP. All postgraduate students from a large UK university who self-identified as being from a minoritised racial background and felt they had experience of IP were invited to take part in an online survey. Demographic information was collected, and participants were asked open ended qualitative questions about their feelings and experiences of IP. In total 71 students completed the survey. Four main themes were developed using thematic analysis: *Hidden away; Problematic awareness; Hell is other people; Our complicated lives.* We report these themes in turn, exploring the nuanced and contextual qualities that frame our participants' experiences of IP. Imposterism is seen to present a range of challenges for students who identify as members of minoritised racial groups, and our findings emphasise the relatedness between representation, belonging, and feelings of imposterism. We suggest that imposterism should be investigated as a multi-layered phenomenon that is potentially more likely to impact students from minoritised backgrounds who lack representation in UK HE settings.  We conclude by offering a series of recommendations for Higher Education institutions, which could start to address some of these issues.

# Introduction

Imposter phenomenon (IP), originally explored in the now classic work of Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes, is defined as an internal experience of intellectual 'phoniness' characterized by individuals attributing their success to external factors (e.g., luck) and believing they are unworthy of their achievements (Clance & Imes, 1978). People who identify with imposterism are understood to experience continuous feelings of insufficiency and fraudulence, irrespective of confirmation of accomplishment or capability, and have a fear of being exposed as a fraud (Barr-Walker et al., 2019; Calvard, 2018; Regan et al., 2020).

IP is increasingly understood to present a significant challenge for students, and it is often associated with high levels of perfectionism and a variety of negative outcomes such as stress, depression, anxiety, workaholic behaviour and burnout (Bravata et al., 2020; Parkman, 2016). Whilst previous research reveals IP to be more prevalent in females than males (Clance & Imes, 1978; Gibson-Beverly & Schwartz, 2008; Price, 2013), there is growing evidence that one of the reasons why women may be more likely to experience IP is because they are more often in a minority within their professional environments (Cozzarelli & Major, 1990; Ferrari & Thompson, 2006; Rohrmann et al., 2016). Furthermore, within the student population, research has revealed that under-represented groups such as first-generation students (Dickerson, 2019) and students from minoritised racial backgrounds (Cokley et al., 2017, 2013; Mullangi & Jagsi, 2019) are particularly vulnerable to experiencing high levels of IP.

There is growing evidence that feelings of imposterism are associated with poor mental health in minoritised racial groups, alongside factors such as minority status stress and perceived discrimination (Cokley et al, 2013; Cokley et al., 2017). Research which has specifically focused on how IP impacts on students from minoritised backgrounds has revealed it to be associated

with a decrease in well-being indicators and a predictor of psychological distress and low self-esteem (Bernard et al, 2020; Peteet et al, 2014).

To date, research in higher education has largely used quantitative methods, including standardised questionnaires/surveys and experimental measures, to examine IP in different student populations and to examine the predictors and outcomes associated with feelings of imposterism (E.g. Austin et al, 2009; Bernard et al, 2020; Cokley et al, 2017; 2013;  Gibson-Beverly & Schwartz, 2008; MacInnis et al, 2019; Peteet et al, 2015; 2014). Whilst this research provides valuable insights into the aetiology, prevalence and impacts of IP, individuals from minoritised racial groups have rarely been involved in the development/standardisation of such instruments designed to assess imposterism. Therefore, the way in which prior studies capture the experiences of students from minoritised ethnic racial groups may be limited (Bravata et al., 2020).

In order to further understanding and add to existing knowledge in this area it is important that qualitative research, which explores students' lived experiences of IP, is also undertaken. Given that imposterism has been found to be associated with a variety of negative outcomes in postgraduate students, it is also important to examine how aspects of the Higher Education environment may contribute to feelings of IP and how racially minoritised students can be more effectively supported within these contexts so that universities can better meet the psychological and academic needs of their students (Le, 2019).

### Purpose of Study

The ambition of this research was to develop understanding of IP experienced by students from minoritised racial backgrounds during their postgraduate studies. By engaging a

qualitative approach we aimed to explore the thoughts, feelings and behaviours that students associate with their, experience of IP, and also to understand  external/situational factors that impact or influence these experiences and, lastly, to gain some insight on how HE institutions might help counter IP.

## Method

Qualitative Survey Methodology

Engagement with online survey methods is perhaps quietly on the rise amongst qualitative researchers. Braun et al (2020) set out the case for online surveys as an exciting and accessible method for doing qualitative research, highlighting a range of strengths that it affords to both participants and researchers. Referring to prior studies that have used qualitative surveys (E.g. Braun et al, 2013; Clarke & Smith, 2015; Davey et al, 2019; Grogan et al, 2018; Jowett & Peel, 2009; Opperman et al, 2014, but see Braun et al, 2020 for additional studies), Braun et al (2020) outline practical advantages which, for the researcher include ease of operationalising the study, increased scope for recruiting larger and/or more diverse samples, and reduced time spent on data collection. For participants, Braun et al (2020) suggest that qualitative surveys offer greater flexibility and increased control over when and what participation involves and are less burdensome overall. They further highlight the potential benefit of the 'anonymous' response mode which can engender a greater degree of ease, enabling participants to speak more candidly with researchers. Braun et al (2020) emphasise that online surveys provide flexibility for exploring diverse topics, and they describe the capacity of online surveys to capture a wide array of diverse participant experiences and perspectives in relation to the topic at hand as "fairly unique within qualitative data collection methods" (p 643). Moreover, this method is shown to be well suited to researching under-explored areas and/or studies which

seek to explore heterogeneity and/or diversity in research with marginalised or under-represented groups. The strengths of this method as outlined by Braun et al (2020) suggest it is ideally suited for meeting the aims of the current study.

## Recruitment and Participants

All Postgraduate Taught and Research students enrolled at a university in the United Kingdom were contacted. The recruitment advert provided an overview of the basic features of IP (e.g., 'When I make a mistake I am worried it will expose me as a 'fraud' or let people know I don't know what I am really doing' and 'People around me think I am more capable than I am. It's only a matter of time until I get found out'). Enrolled postgraduate students were invited to participate if they self-identified as being from a 'BAME' background and experienced feelings which they associated with imposterism. A total of 71 participants completed the survey out of a possible 137 who started the survey – 52% completion rate.

## Procedure and Ethics

Students were emailed a recruitment advert via their university email accounts which provided an outline of the project and a link to the online survey. The survey data was collected using Qualtrics online software [2021] (Qualtrics, Provo, UT). The survey presented participants with a detailed information leaflet describing the study aims and method and full information regarding ethics and data management. The study was conducted in adherence with the British Psychological Society's ethical guidelines for internet mediated research (BPS, 2017) and informed consent was obtained online prior to participation. The research received ethical approval from the faculty ethics committee of the host institution.

Demographic information (age, gender, ethnic background, and sexual orientation) was collected. In a bid not to limit how participants might define their own gender, sexuality or

ethnic identity, participants were invited to describe their gender, sexuality, and ethnicity in their own terms. Participants were also asked whether they were the first generation in their family to study at university or to undertake postgraduate study, about their domicile status (UK student, EU/international student), and about the course they were undertaking (PG taught/ PG research). Indicators of social disadvantage were explored by inviting a response to the following question: 'When you were growing up do you think that social division or issues within your culture/ethnicity/society put your family in a disadvantaged situation?' (yes/no response). A series of open-ended questions explored how participants experienced IP and how they could be better supported (Table 1). The questions were developed with input from former postgraduate students from minoritised racial backgrounds.

[insert table 1]

*Analysis*

Data was downloaded from Qualtrics into an Excel spreadsheet. Responses to the qualitative questions were collated, and inductive Thematic Analysis (TA) was used to analyse the data. All members of the researcher team were experienced in using thematic analysis.  We engaged with the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) (i.e. familiarisation with data, generation of codes, searching for themes, review of themes, defining and naming of themes, producing the report) as a framework to guide our analytic process. During initial coding we examined responses to each question in turn and developed a set of superordinate codes which mapped against each question. These codes were subsequently collapsed to generate themes and sub-themes. Four researchers, (LK, RM, TL & JP) independently familiarised themselves with the data, coded the data and developed indicative themes. The research team met on two occasions to discuss and review progress and subsequently define and name the themes. During these meetings, research team

members also engaged in reflexivity to consider how our expertise, perspectives and backgrounds could be influencing our understanding and analysis of the data. At the time of undertaking the research and writing this article, the second and third authors identified as Black International doctoral students and early career academics. The first and fourth authors identified as white, British mid-career working class academics.

## Results

A mixture of postgraduate research and taught students completed the online survey (N=71). The mean age of participants was 32.5years (range 22-60yrs) and the majority were female (N=49, 72.1%). Three participants did not provide age/gender data. Participant responses to the question which asked them to identify their ethnic background were both varied and nuanced, this itself reflecting something insightful regarding the limitations of pre-defined ethnicity categories that are more typically used in research. The full list of participant-defined ethnicities is listed in the visual below.

[insert wordcloud]

Four main themes were developed: (1) *Hidden away;* (2) *Problematic awareness;* (3) *Hell is other people;* and (4) *Our complicated lives*. Themes 1 – 3 reflect many areas of overlap with the existing body of IP literature, whilst Theme 4 most directly relates to issues of identity and representation. Due to space restrictions, we therefore provide an overview of themes 1-3 and focus in more depth on theme 4 which we consider to be the richest in terms of generating a greater understanding of how IP is experienced amongst students from minoritised racial backgrounds.

*Theme 1: 'Hidden Away'*

Sub-theme: Visible is vulnerable

Our analysis indicates that IP is often triggered when participants are under scrutiny. This includes (i) points of transition and/or progression; (ii) participation in teaching and PGCE training; (iii) delivering presentations and/or displays of practical mastery; (iii) being singled out for praise. These findings cohere with existing studies of IP amongst postgraduate students which highlights that increased visibility in class can act as a trigger (Cisco, 2020), however there are also some interesting nuances in our data.

Firstly, our analysis reveals that a lack of ethnic or racial representation in a student cohort increases feelings of visibility, and therefore vulnerability, to IP amongst racially minoritised students. As one participant reflected - "d*uring lectures I find it difficult to share my ideas because I already stand out being 1 of 2 blacks in the course. I just think my ideas or views don't really matter."* Furthermore, whilst difficulty accepting the validity of praise is a well-recognised component of IP (Sakulku & Alexander, 2011), in our data we identified a more nuanced challenge whereby, praise is not always trusted as a genuine indicator of achievement, as opposed to a reflection of wider societal pressures and/or a desire on the part of the praise-giver to be seen as inclusive.

Lastly, teaching duties and PGCE training were repeatedly singled out as provoking or exacerbating these feelings amongst PGR students. These participants described heightened fears about being harshly judged by peers as well as senior colleagues when delivering teaching and participating in marking activities.

Sub-theme: Withdrawal and isolation

Related to the discomfort of visibility, we found that the experience of IP tends to be couched in loneliness and gives rise to a variety of unpleasant physical manifestations including intense feelings of fear and/or anxiety which only increase the desire to withdraw. Fear of discovery as a 'fraud' is something that many participants refer to, and the dread of being 'found out' is repeatedly mentioned.  It is important to note that whilst the desire to withdraw from peers and tutors might be framed as problematic, for many of our participants it was a preferred coping mechanism. Interestingly, where other, arguably healthier management strategies are referred to, a desire for solitude is often still emphasised (e.g., a tendency for meditation). Participants valued privacy and safe spaces for the release of physical symptoms and emotional recovery.

*Theme 2: Problematic Awareness*

Many of our participants report relatively good levels of familiarity with the basic tenets of IP. However, whilst knowledge of IP might be assumed useful, it seems that understanding what IP is and how it can manifest does little to mitigate against the impact of experiencing it. Broadly, we found that whilst participants might recognise or advocate a range of strategies designed to combat feelings of imposterism (i.e., avoid self-other comparison; draw on objective knowledge of prior accomplishments; empathise; encourage self-validation), they did not feel able to utilise these strategies to combat their own feelings of IP. In contrast to the 'self-help' focus which participants regularly relayed to others experiencing imposterism, our data suggests that when IP sufferers are provided such information, they often struggle to utilise it as a means of countering or combatting their own experiences.

The tendency to discount information which objectively contradicts feelings of IP (e.g. external assessment of performance) is in keeping with existing literature (Sakulku &

Alexander, 2011), what is perhaps less well recognised is that attempts to encourage sufferers to accept positive assessments can further compound the psychological conflict that people experience in trying to make sense of their own feelings. As one participant reflected *"I am often told to just accept that I am good. I don't think that helps, it increases the pressure and increases expectations."*

*Theme 3: Hell is Other People*

Whether resulting from the strong tendency for self-other comparison, and the related challenges posed by witnessing other people's successes, or driven by the weight of other people's expectation, we found that feelings of IP were often bound up with concerns about others. Pressures of expectation including familial expectations and worries about letting family members down were compounded by the pride family members attached to moments of achievement, which ran counter to the deeply held IP belief that prior success is simple 'fluke'. Thus, other people's expectations, even when based in objective prior outcomes, are experienced as additional pressures. Often, the individual experiences mounting success like an unstable house of cards, just waiting for the inevitable collapse.

A less common aspect of our data, but nevertheless an important one, concerns the impact of explicit narratives of exclusion which undermine a sense of belonging:

> *"I think it's a lot on other people. They can make you feel like you are small and don't*
>
> *belong here. In fact, I have people explicitly tell me that I don't belong in my industry and*
>
> *will never fit in which has really stuck with me."*

Across our data many comments highlight that feelings of IP occur when students experienced themselves as 'other' amongst those inhabiting their social milieu. This is something we explore in more depth below.

*Theme 4: Our Complicated Lives*

Sub-theme: Stereotypes and specificity

This first sub-theme reveals how historical racial and cultural stereotypes foster feelings of imposterism. The following comments were offered by two of our participants.

> *"In the past, when I've talked about my education accomplishments people have shown surprise and I put that to the fact that I am black. I think other ethnicities have negative beliefs towards what a black person can achieve (music, sport). Additionally, teachers not knowing my cultural differences (lack of eye contact, being quiet) have led to them making assumptions about me which then resulted in me feeling never good enough"*

> *"Having to prove myself as worthy more so because I was Asian. Also, this expectation and stereotype from people that Asians are smarter, so having to go above and beyond that"*

What is evident here is that feelings of IP are exacerbated by racialised stereotypes, but the specificity of the stereotype presents different kinds of challenge. The first extract outlines challenges which spring from stereotypes which attach low expectations or niche interests to black students. Whilst conversely, the second extract highlights problems resulting from 'smart Asian' stereotypes. This presents an important reminder of the dangers of constructing a homogenous 'non-white other' under the label of 'BAME', or indeed any other terminology.

Feelings of imposterism are also elevated when there is a lack of cultural or racial representation.

> *"Limited representation of people that look like me in my field of study usually makes me feel like a standout and people are questioning what I am doing in a place like that as a really stand out from the rest"*

As evidenced in theme one, standing out presents a particular challenge for those experiencing imposterism. Clearly in environments that lack racial diversity, this challenge becomes more profound for members of minoritised racial groups.

Many participants provide compelling, and often sobering accounts which positioned their feelings of imposterism in relation to their minoritised racial background. In addition, there was also a clear sense IP was connected to multifaceted aspects of social and personal identity which we expand on below.

Sub-theme: Intersectional concerns

Our analysis reveals that intersecting aspects of identity, including race, ethnicity, gender, class and sexuality were all considered to play a part in IP experiences.

> *"I'm also a woman in a traditionally male dominant field and that plays into it as well […]I feel the pressure to excel and work even harder to prove I belong whilst at the same time questioning if I even do belong "*

> *"being female has carried certain barriers that I cannot fully define or identify.  Until recently I do not feel as if I have been given the same opportunities/respect growing up as my male counterparts."*

The quotes above from two different participants reflect the views of many who indicated that gender was also a major contributory factor. Gender has long been associated with imposterism, since the original studies found that women are disproportionately affected (Clance & Imes, 1978). However, contemporary research suggests a more nuanced picture in relation to gender (e.g., Badawy, 2018), and, as the quote below indicates, IP may be more related to a lack of equal representation than gender, per se.

> *"Being one of the very few male students in my course I always feel out of place."*

When it comes to intersections of race and gender, the quote below, demonstrates how some students experience their identity in the context of a white, elite, Western, male-dominated university.

> *"I am an African woman, we are at the bottom of the human food chain."*

Social class was another aspect of identity that participants shared as a relevant concern.

> *"I wasn't from a high social class (a rural girl) and this affected me as a person, as a student, and even as a teacher later on."*

> *"At university I felt like most people I met came from a "better" social background […]. It made me feel like I stood out as someone from a below-average school and a family that didn't have much wealth. I think that feeds into feelings of being an imposter."*

> *"W/Class background meant there was no understanding of education or how it worked or aspirations for academic success. This likely set up patterns of thinking that meant I am somewhere 'I shouldn't be'."*

Whilst many participants did believe that race, ethnicity or cultural background were associated with imposterism, our data also reflected some differing opinions, including some clearly contrary perspectives.

> " I have never doubted myself because of my ethnicity, but because I underestimated myself, which as already mentioned I use to my advantage by working harder than I otherwise might have done."

> "I think that ethnic background is not relevant to feelings of imposterism. In my opinion feelings of imposterism happened to a person who compared themself to others which are usually has a similar background for example friends or family."

Clearly, there is no simple relationship between experiencing feelings of IP and being from a minoritised racial background, but our data strongly suggests a greater need to contextualise imposterism as being founded in societal and institutional structures rather than located as residing within the individual's psyche.

> "When you come from a background which does not typically breed 'organisational success' it can be challenging to see yourself in a position of authority. The further up the hierarchical structures you go the more white it becomes, the more male it becomes, the more the age bracket becomes within a specific range."

> "The problem being investigated by this research exists because of systemic and institutional issues; racism, sexism, etc. If everyone is treated decently, we are seen as "people" rather than identified by skin colour, gender, orientation, age, class, etc, then issues like imposterism would and should not exist."

Sub-theme: Internationality

Our final sub-theme emphasises that experiences of imposterism amongst international students have some potentially quite distinctive features. Concerns about language barriers are a repeated feature of our data, with international students highlighting that when English is a second language, worries about being less fluent than their peers and tutors often triggers feelings of imposterism

> *"Not having enough fluency in English definitely makes the confidence level low. I do not feel discriminated but […] I feel it is easier for lots of people to have others who speak local language fluently than someone who does not have the same level of fluency. Getting a simple jobs is difficult."*

> *"sometimes I feel like my Professors think I'm stupid because I can't express myself very eloquently."*

In addition, for some international students, histories of race and colonialism, global inequalities and the domination of Western nations further contribute to feelings of imposterism.

> *"Yes, the academic structure in terms of how the lecture is delivered is quite different. My status as an international student, most especially coming from Africa, is a constant reminder of the duration of my welcome."*

> *"I feel like most people here (UK) and other white-majority places; think Africans are stupid/backward/irrelevant. I have had classroom experiences where some lecturers simply ignore us (so-called black people) and refer to other continents in their teaching examples. It's common knowledge that 'black people are inferior to other races. I also don't feel like my educational background prepared me adequately for the kind of academic experience in this country. I often feel like a fish out of water."*

*"In this country, I feel like I'm inferior to everyone else [...] Who am I to expect better*

*outcomes for my life when I come from a continent everyone associates with poverty,*

*disease, ignorance and even death?"*

These extracts give cause for close reflection about the challenges facing some international

students when they enter learning environments in the UK, and the significance of classroom

experiences, teaching content and the content of the curriculum on students' sense of

belonging.  Again, the data emphasise how IP is not rooted within the individual, but in the

social, cultural, and historical environment in which students operate.

## Discussion and Implications

### *Summary of findings*

The aim of this research was to gain an understanding of how postgraduate students from

minoritised racial backgrounds experience IP and how these students feel they could be

better supported. In keeping with prior research (Barr-Walker et al., 2019; Cisco, 2020; Ewing

et al., 1996; Gibson-Beverly & Schwartz, 2008) participants discussed how key points in their

journey, such as career transitions and successes in professional progression often provoked

IP. We would add to this a need to recognise the challenges associated with teaching duties.

Teaching is an increasingly integral aspect of a doctoral students' responsibilities and

undertaking a PGCE is the usual means through which institutions support the development

of their teaching staff. Our findings suggest that these unfamiliar activities placed doctoral

students in a visible, and therefore vulnerable, position and often fuelled anxieties around

getting things 'wrong', regardless of feedback, or evidence they were doing a 'good job'. HE

institutions should therefore consider how students are helped to prepare for these 'additional responsibilities' to minimise the risk these activities will trigger or exacerbate students' feeling of imposterism.

In line with prior research (e.g., Austin et al., 2009; Bernard et al., 2017; Bravata et al., 2020; Cokley et al., 2018; Cokley et al., 2013; Hernanz et al., 2020; Jaremka et al., 2020; Joshi and Mangette,2018), our findings also highlight that it is extremely difficult for students to speak about their feelings of imposterism or seek out support. Feelings of imposterism can present something of a double bind, whereby to speak openly about feelings of fraudulence is tantamount to offering yourself up to be 'discovered' as the fraud you believe yourself to be, and therefore vulnerable to the consequences of such. An awareness of this dilemma further reinforces the importance of universities taking a proactive approach to understanding and responding to these challenges.

A focal objective of this research was to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of how aspects of identity relate to experiences of imposterism amongst postgraduate students. The research did not start out from a particular set of assumptions about how, or if, racial or cultural identity might connect with the experience of imposterism, but in line with the literature, the findings from this research did reveal that IP is associated with a general lack of belonging and under-representation within the given environment (Bravata et al., 2020; Feenstra et al., 2020; Peteet et al., 2015).

Our participants self-identified as being from minoritised racial groups, and our findings suggest that lack of representation of the given racial, cultural, or ethnic group, and stereotypical assumptions about a given minoritised group serve to exacerbate feelings of imposterism. The data also highlights the need to avoid making generalisations about how racial and cultural stereotypes may impact on minoritised students' experience of

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imposterism and associated well-being in educational contexts (Le, 2019). Whilst stereotypes were roundly problematic, the specificity of the stereotype requires proper consideration to understand the impact. This is consistent with research undertaken by Cokley et al (2013), which found that whilst both Asian American and African American students experienced similar academic challenges (e.g., imposterism, anxiety), African Americans experienced additional discriminatory behaviour that had negatively impacted on their academic journey and feelings of imposterism.

Our findings also emphasise a range of intersectional concerns related to how IP is experienced. Participants emphasised that gender and social class were also factors that left them vulnerable to feelings of imposterism. Concerns with social class are consistent with contemporary research on imposterism in a range of professional settings, which suggests that class may play an important role in the development and maintenance of IP (Goor et al., 2020; MacInnis et al., 2019). In the HE context, the commitment to widening participation initiatives might suggest that university is an increasingly accessible environment for students irrespective of financial or class background. Metrics which reflect growth in numbers of first-generation students, particularly at post-92 institutions would be testament to the success of such initiatives (Read et al, 2003). However, we suggest that what might currently be less well recognised are challenges of 'belonging' and how these impact students from working class and/or financially poor backgrounds as they seek to navigate a university environment.

Lastly, we found that international students might be especially vulnerable to the challenges of (un)belonging in the UK HE context. For many international students, imposterism is not only a psychological phenomenon or one rooted in representation, but also a material reality with belonging experienced as both conditional and finite.

In sum, our findings emphasise the complexity of imposterism, often connected to multifaceted aspects of social and personal identity and intersecting minoritised characteristics and feelings of belonging.

### Recommendations for Change

*Understanding IP from a social-psychological perspective*

Our findings suggest a need for creating spaces and resources which normalise the experience of imposterism, and which present a counter narrative to the individualised 'deficit' explanatory model.

1. Change the language

There is a need to recognise the impact of language on human experience and revise the way we talk about experiences of IP.  The language of 'syndrome' conveys notions of a flawed or damaged individual and frames the source of this experience as residing within the individual. In doing so, it shifts the gaze away from the structures and institutions, in which feelings of imposterism arise. When an experience such as imposterism is over-individualised it neglects to recognise how social structures and contexts can create and maintain the problem (Feenstra et al, 2020). Moreover, the narrative of imposter 'syndrome' potentially exacerbates feelings of shame that are associated with this experience. Staff development should therefore directly critique the 'deficit' explanatory model and consider its use of language.

2. Provide timely and nuanced support

It is important that students from minoritised backgrounds receive effective support from programs within their institutions at appropriate time points in their studies (Le, 2019). The

results from the current study emphasise the benefit of incorporating open and honest conversations about IP into all postgraduate level courses and ensuring that students and supervisors have the resources and support needed to engage in these conversations (Cisco, 2020). We propose that creating space and opportunities for collaborative discussions could take place during postgraduate inductions and through targeted sessions during significant transitions (Burt et al 2017).

Our findings also indicate that effective strategies must take account of the pervasive qualities of the experience and recognise that solely engaging a rationalist counter-narrative founded on objective information about performance is, at best limited and, at worst counterproductive. Increasing awareness and familiarity with imposterism can help individuals understand their own experience, but this alone does not equip them to tackle it. Expecting those who experience imposterism to use objective information to 'talk themselves out' of these feelings can compound the challenge they face.

Lived experience could be a powerful tool in combatting the isolation associated with imposterism. Academics, and where appropriate, students from a diverse range of backgrounds should be encouraged and supported in sharing their experiences, particularly as it relates to their own identity (ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality, class, disability). The use of promotional materials in HE incorporating images of students from a diverse range of minoritised groups has also been recognised as an component of reducing students susceptibility to IP (Ramsey and Brown, 2017).

3. Develop inclusive, culturally aware, and culturally diverse communities

Diversity and inclusion training for staff should include increasing awareness of how feelings of imposterism are related to, and in many respects reflective of, issues of belonging and representation. Staff development should build knowledge and understanding of how IP may

present in, and impact on, students from minoritised groups differently. Research investigating how discrimination, minority status stress and microaggressions fuel experiences of imposterism amongst minoritised groups is beginning to emerge (Bernard et al., 2017; Bernard et al., 2018; McClain et al., 2016; Fakunle, 2021), and our findings add to this. To help combat IP amongst minoritised groups it is important that organisations bolster and enforce their non-discriminatory practices (Badawy et al, 2018). This includes a need for practical staff training in dealing with racism and discrimination, and training to help staff recognise and respect cultural differences and feel confident in facilitating integrative cultural relationships (Bunce et al, 2019).

4. Mentoring, coaching and skill development

The use of peer mentors is recognised as a useful way of providing students with opportunities to share and make sense of their experiences and help build their confidence (Le, 2019). We propose that peer mentoring has potential to support students from minoritised racial backgrounds in exploring and addressing imposterism in culturally safe and appropriate ways, with a recognition that understanding imposterism does not in itself alter the experience of it but affords space to reflect and explore the impact of it.

Furthermore, professional mentoring could also be beneficial for students through the creation of a constructive relationship which can aid the development of realistic competence expectations (Badawy et al, 2018).  Dedicated discussion of imposterism could be integrated within academic adviser and supervisory roles. Social support, positive affirmation and validation and the opportunity for students to share reflections can all play a protective role against IP (Gottlieb et al, 2020). Coaching, specifically around how to challenge/manage unhelpful kinds of working styles such as perfectionism or procrastination

may be particularly useful (Leonhardt et al, 2017). Indeed, research has revealed that coping strategies which draw on external support (e.g., support from colleagues, supervisors, mentors) are more effective at managing IP than internal coping strategies used alone (Barr-Walker et al, 2020).

*Strengths and limitations*

To date, there has been limited research exploring how students from minoritised backgrounds experience IP and a significant lack of qualitative studies. By engaging an online qualitative survey we were able to provide participants a safe space to unpack and share their experiences, perspectives, and beliefs relating to IP. The qualitative survey approach enabled us to move beyond top-down assumptions and/or constraints imposed by more traditional closed questionnaires. Inviting responses to open-ended qualitative questions provided participants with a guiding framework which kept their focus on matters related to our research topic whilst also giving them control to develop their responses however they wished. It further afforded participants the opportunity to take time for reading and reflection without feeling the interactional pressure to provide a 'tip of the tongue' response. The online survey design also allowed for the recruitment of a large and diverse sample. This was important for our research aims and helped us explore similarities and significant variations in the lived experiences of IP amongst postgraduate students from minoritised racial backgrounds.

Of course, the study was not without limitations. All students that participated in the research attended the same UK HE institution which potentially limits the wider application of the findings. However, given the diversity of the participant group both in terms of their demographic backgrounds and their wide-ranging areas of academic study, we suggest there is much in our findings of relevance to postgraduate provision and understanding and

combatting IP broadly.  With regard to the online survey method, we are mindful of the assumed limitations that are explored elsewhere, including debates about the relative merits of qualitative surveys as compared to interviews and concerns regarding their limited potential to elicit rich data (see Braun et al, 2020). Our data certainly did not suffer from brevity of participant response or a lack of depth.  Whilst interviews would have no doubt elicited *different* data, we would question any assumption that collecting data within an interview setting would have somehow resulted in more developed or meaningful data. Data quality aside, we are mindful that our survey completion rate was 52% and as the study design did not make it possible to collect information regarding reasons for disengagement, we cannot account for the dropout rate. There is limited information regarding typical completion rates for online qualitative surveys to compare against, however we note that Peel (2009) reports a completion rate of 65% from an initial 60 responses to their online survey following a strategic opportunistic sampling approach, thus a lower response rate but a higher completion. Given the tendency toward withdrawal associated with IP, it is plausible that students experiencing extreme levels of fear or anxiety associated with IP may have been interested and decided to access  the survey but then opted to withdraw. However, if this even partly accounts for dropout, it is doubtful that such participants would have opted to engage with an in-person study either. Moreover, the 52% completion rate generated a sample of 71 participants which, according to Braun et al (2020), place this sample in the 'mid-range' for online qualitative surveys, and we found this sample more than sufficient in generating a rich and diverse dataset that was well suited to our research aims.

Finally, we want to acknowledge the issues and complexities around language and terminology which presented challenges for this research. Throughout the HE sector there is still widespread use of the terminology 'Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME)' to aggregate

students from a range of differing racial and ethnic backgrounds. This terminology is problematised or rejected by many of the people that it is applied to, and indeed it is recognised as problematic by many within and beyond the university who it is not applied to. In undertaking this work, the research team collectively elected to utilise 'BAME' terminology within recruitment materials because we felt that working with the existing university terminology would ensure that potential participants would be familiar with the language, thus, it was a strategic aspect of our recruitment. However, this terminology is not something we wish to continue to (re)produce, hence we asked participants to define their ethnic or racial identity using their own terms, and within our writing we refer to students from 'minoritised racial backgrounds'. This is reflective of discussions amongst all members of the team, and the preferred terminology of team members who themselves identify as being from minoritised racial backgrounds. Within the equality, diversity and inclusion sphere, language is evolving at pace. There are no perfect solutions, and there are rarely any universally preferred terms, however, the aim of the researchers was to be mindful of current debates, select terms that felt most appropriate for this research, and remain open to future changes which emerge as part of a progressive debate.

## Conclusion

Addressing imposterism amongst racially minoritised students in higher education is an important but challenging task (Le, 2019). We suggest that to fully understand IP, a social-psychological perspective is required which recognises the important role that social context has on students' experiences of imposterism; this will help ensure that future research and practice addresses the social roots of this phenomenon (Feenstra et al., 2020). Our study supports the use of online qualitative surveys as a valuable method within the qualitative researchers 'toolbox', and our findings support the need for higher education institutions and

educators to promote inclusive practices, which challenge discrimination and foster an

environment where diversity is respected, mistakes are normalised, and student growth is

reinforced through a variety of l support mechanisms such as peer mentoring, holistic

supervision practices and skills training.

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Table 1. IP questions included in the qualitative survey

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|---|
| 1. Can you describe a past situation/circumstances which has triggered thoughts/feelings associated with imposterism (e.g. made you doubt your ability to succeed, made you feel like your peers are more capable than you, made you fearful you would be found out as a 'fraud' etc.)? |
| 2. How do you feel (emotionally and physically) when you experience these situations |
| 3. What do you do when you experience these types of situations? |
| 4. If a friend told you that they were experiencing feelings of imposterism how would you try and help them deal with it? |
| 5. How do other people affect or influence your feelings of imposterism? |
| 6. Do you think there are factors related to your ethnic background that might make you vulnerable to experiencing feelings of imposterism (e.g minority status stress/discrimination, educational history, teacher-student dynamics)? Please elaborate on your answer |
| 7. Please tell us if you think other aspects of identity or background are relevant to experiencing imposterism (e.g. gender, class, sexuality) |
| 8. What do you think the university could do to try and minimise the challenges of IP, or to support students in dealing with this? (Think about what might help prevent feelings of IP as well as what could be done to help people better manage feelings of IP) |

Wordcloud: Responses to Question – "Please describe your ethnicity using terminology that you feel is most appropriate"