"WHAT AM I DOING HERE?" IMPOSTER SYNDROME AND INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES PROPAGATING FEELINGS OF INADEQUACY AMONG GRADUATE STUDENTS

By Nida Abaad Elias (Thesis) submitted to the School of Graduate Studies in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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Abstract

We have all felt incredibly inadequate at some point in our lives. The pervasive thought that “everybody is more brilliant than me” is more common than we think. However, how often do we think of it as being propagated by institutional factors? My study examines how imposter syndrome, structural constraints, and their meanings interplay in academia. I spoke to 20 graduate students from different faculties, backgrounds, and genders at the Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN) via semi-structured interviews. I found that participants frequently used impression management techniques, consistently showcasing skills, achievements, or levels of knowledge through their narrations. Participants approached imposter syndrome mainly as an internal personal issue, constantly comparing themselves to other people’s situations. In doing so, they used a single definition of success or failure in academia. However, the data showed that structural factors, such as racism, patriarchy, colonialism, a working yourself-to-the-bone culture, lack of support from gatekeepers, and COVID-19, all had an immense impact on feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt among graduate students.

Keywords: imposter syndrome, symbolic interactionism, saving face, impression management.

General Summary

My research views imposter syndrome – a constant feeling of not being good enough – as influenced by structural factors in academic institutions. I interviewed 20 graduate students from different backgrounds and faculties at Memorial University of Newfoundland. The results showed that students believed their feelings of inadequacy were personal flaws. They frequently compared themselves to others, using narrow definitions of success and failure. However, their narrations showed that larger structural issues, such as racism, sexism, colonialism, the intense pressure to overwork, and the lack of support from supervisors and the COVID-19 pandemic often reinforced these feelings. This research highlights the importance of recognizing and addressing the institutional factors that contribute to imposter syndrome among graduate students.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In the fall of 2022, I attended my first graduate seminar class, and as I took my seat and surveyed the other thirteen students sitting around me, I immediately felt like I did not belong there. 'How will I get through a year of this?' constantly ran through my mind as people introduced themselves and shared their experiences and backgrounds. I even entertained the idea of leaving and deferring my admission. It was the typical flight response. At the time, I could not quite place *what* I was feeling and *why* I felt this overwhelming inadequacy. It was not until a few classes later in that same course that I was introduced to imposter syndrome, and I immediately felt like the professor was addressing me. This prompted me to study the topic in light of institutional structures and norms in academia.

Feeling like a fraud when starting something new is more common than we think. New situations trigger our insecurities because they appear to have little room for error (Nedegaard, 2016). However, imposter syndrome is when people frequently feel like they are not as capable or adequate as others consider them to be. They constantly feel a sense of intellectual self-doubt, phoniness, and an incapability to take credit for their skills, talents, and accomplishments. As a result, they feel undeserving of the position(s) or awards they have achieved, often attributing their success to sheer luck. Even if they have positive evaluations from others and accolades or titles to their name, individuals experiencing the imposter syndrome phenomena cannot help but feel perpetual dread of being exposed as a fraud and people finding out that they "do not have it in them."

Sociological literature explores imposter syndrome as a public feeling that stems from institutional elements in conjunction with certain groups and places (Breeze, 2018; Breeze et al., 2022; Taylor & Breeze, 2020, as cited in Murray et al., 2023). However, the focus is on marginalized communities and how individuals experience imposter syndrome. My research took a social constructionist perspective and was open to all genders, races, and backgrounds. It focused on how academia breeds imposter syndrome, normally viewed as an internal issue, by exploring the meaning-making process that graduate students engage in to comprehend their self-doubt and inadequacy. The findings also revealed that reputation and self-image mattered significantly. Thus, participants consistently used impression management and showcased their skills, knowledge, and achievements through narration and storytelling. Regarding the theme of saving face, students showcasing their skills and achievements through their narrations, using neutrality to balance out the negative and positive elements in stories, and the connotation surrounding the word "interesting" were all unique to this study.

By studying what social processes are taking place in academia, my research fills a gap by bringing together the literature on saving face and the literature on imposter syndrome. While considerable work has been done on impression management, these two pieces of literature have not been brought together in the past. My focus was also on *how* people are accomplishing impression management, even during the interviews. I establish a novel connection between imposter syndrome and saving face by exploring the meaning-making process behind the two. Through my research, I am also adding to the only recent conversation about how imposter syndrome is propagated by institutional factors which are largely left unaddressed.

Similar to previous literature (Johnson & Smith, 2019; Edwards, 2019; Perez, 2020), individuals perceived imposter syndrome mainly as an internal problem, attributing their

tendency to draw comparisons to their insecurities or alleged shortcomings. It was clear that a single definition of success and failure was prevalent in academia, and if their circumstances did not fully come under those definitions, they felt relentlessly inadequate. While participants approached imposter syndrome as an internal problem, the data showed that structural factors like racism, patriarchy, colonialism, a culture of working yourself to the bone, lack of support from gatekeepers, and COVID-19 all had a significant influence on the sense of belonging and feelings of worthlessness among students.

I used the phrase “ideal student background” to illustrate the idea that universities are geared towards catering to a young student with a relevant academic background to their chosen degree subject, who has not taken a break between their studies, has enough financial backing not to have to work to survive and does not have competing responsibilities that would otherwise restrict them from studying “nine to five.” This idea was implied in multiple interviews when graduate students who did not fall under these categories or were in situations that required more accommodation expressed these factors as the reasons for constant comparison, making them feel inadequate and doubtful of themselves.

Additionally, I used the phrase "knowledge is power" to explain how important it was for participants to have *complete* knowledge about their subject area and know as many people as possible in the department. It automatically gave them a sense of power and authority over others when they knew more, which is interesting to think about when one considers where this notion comes from. The lack of knowledge made participants feel inadequate and undeserving of their place in the program. It was also propagated when they compared themselves to others and assumed they knew much less than their peers. As far as I

know, literature on imposter syndrome has not linked this concept to self-doubt and inadequacy.

1.1.Is it Problematic to View Imposter Syndrome Solely on an Individual Level?

Existing research has focused mainly on how high-achieving individuals can overcome feeling like a fraud by letting go of perfectionism, being kind to themselves, and recognizing their accomplishments (Johnson & Smith, 2019; Edwards, 2019). The onus is kept on the self-proclaimed "imposter" to alleviate their imposter feelings, which is why biases, barriers, and hierarchies remain established (Ochs, 2022). These "feel-good fixes" rarely analyze institutional culture and values and do not address power imbalances between the people suffering and the environment that promotes it (Andrews, 2020). Seeing imposter syndrome as linked to self-confidence is problematic because even when people are sure about themselves, that does not mean they will not be shut down or ignored. It is also problematic when scholars who have not had experiences of imposter syndrome write about them. This kind of saviour complex allows them to see certain groups as the “other,” allowing them to defend the colonized space as their own.

Thus, very few studies view it as a sociological problem and address the root cause of imposter syndrome in academia as stemming from inequalities by examining students' meaning-making process. Having so much extra emotional energy on individual shoulders is also problematic. C. Wright Mills (1916-1962) came up with the concept of the sociological imagination, which enables people to view their lives and their personal issues and link them to other individuals, history, or societal structures. Individuals make choices about their family, friends, work, and other issues within their control. However, social issues are public, beyond one’s control and exist outside of the range of one's inner life. This idea of troubles

being personal challenges versus issues being larger social challenges helps people relate their individual experiences to the larger society. Treating some personal issues like imposter syndrome, which is not exclusively experienced as a personal problem and is influenced by social norms and expectations, puts the blame on the individual, and the range of solutions offered does not consider the effect of social institutions, which are propagating pervasive feelings of inadequacy.

We can understand this research gap if we analyze the implications of students' narrations and experiences. My research examined imposter syndrome as an institutional issue in academia among Canadian and international graduate students across disciplines and genders. It uncovered the meaning behind people's experiences of imposter syndrome without assuming that women, people of colour, and international graduate students are more vulnerable and without invalidating the experience of male or Canadian graduate students. The research also considered that even within racial, gender, and cross-discipline groups, there are many differences in how imposter syndrome is felt and experienced. Therefore, it sought to increase our knowledge of the social world and recognize practices, interactions, and behaviours that propagate discrimination.

1.2.Theoretical Orientation

The following research questions guide my thesis: 1) What are the institutional and cultural norms that propagate these feelings of self-doubt in academia? 2) How do people's backgrounds and socialization make them vulnerable to imposter syndrome? 3) How do people in marginalized groups navigate through power dynamics that cultivate isolation for them but are also engrained in social systems? and 4) How do students from Canadian and international backgrounds encounter imposter syndrome differently? The theoretical framework that guided my paper was the idea of inhabited institutions (Hallett et al., Ventresca., 2006) within symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism is a sociological perspective (Mead, 1863 – 1963; Weber, 1864 – 1920) focusing on how people create and interpret meanings through interactions. It highlights the importance of symbols, language, and social cues and interactions in shaping individuals' behaviour and understanding of the world. Symbolic interactionists see the macro in the micro and explore how structures influence our everyday lives on the ground level.

Additionally, the idea of inhabited institutions states that organizations and institutions cannot exist without people propelling them. Thus, this concept accounts for the dynamics among institutions, social interactions, and organizations to explore how society operates. Structures exist because of the meanings individuals give to them. In line with symbolic interactionism as a guiding framework, the meanings of these things are derived from or emerge from the social interactions that individuals have with each other. Thus, these meanings are handled and altered through an interpretative process as people deal with things they encounter (Blumer, 1969).

Symbolic interactionism also includes the concept of impression management, i.e., when people want to be successful, they manage and manipulate impressions and communicate a competent self that would like to be trusted and accepted. These could be in situations where the audience has high expectations of competence and is a potentially critical and condemning group. Consequently, these people look for cues of personal or institutional competence, and practitioners arrange a carefully managed self-presentation to create and maintain a reality of competence. People who experience imposter feelings maintain a perfectionist self-presentation as they hold higher standards for themselves, and the higher the bar, the more they might feel like a fraud in their efforts to maintain an appearance as perfect as possible (Cowie et al.,2018).

My thesis also focuses on the people who sustain those institutions and the ways that interactions are impacted when individuals in the academic sphere relentlessly feel like they do not deserve to be in the position they are currently in. It will also examine social processes and complex social realities that many students face and how these complexities relate to how universities implement the claim to celebrate EDI in academic environments. The onus to create inclusive environments rests largely on university gatekeepers, staff, and faculty members, so awareness of these constructs and their ultimate impact on students is vital.

A qualitative approach worked well for this topic as the research focused on the generic social processes at play when people experienced imposter syndrome and the interactions that caused it. Exploring subjective meanings and social concepts involving imposter syndrome and then studying it in an academic setting via in-depth interviews can show how it manifests in varying and more extensive social settings. This is because the interview process involves interpretation and the social construction of reality, which has

implications for any study that uses interviews to collect data (Day, 1985). Hence, we can apply this research to different social settings where people experience imposter syndrome and navigate through power dynamics that cultivate feelings of isolation.

In terms of what is to come in the following sections, chapter two gives insight into the ways imposter syndrome has been studied in different disciplines. This literature review chapter is divided into subsections based on the data gathered through my research. For example, literature on structural constraints and their link to imposter syndrome was a concept discussed in the interviews. Thus, I have drawn parallels between previous research and my findings on structural factors, explaining how my thesis delves into existing research and theories on imposter syndrome. It also examines how institutional and cultural norms contribute to feelings of inadequacy among students and faculty, emphasizing the role of competition, performance pressure, and microaggressions.

Chapter three summarizes the methodology, providing an overview of the theoretical framework that guides my thesis, my chosen research design, and the ethical considerations relevant to my approach. This section offers justifications for every single methodological choice I made, including my research design, research philosophy, research strategy, time horizon, sampling, data collection method and data analysis method.

The findings and analysis are merged into chapter four, which is divided into the main themes and subthemes. This section includes direct quotes of participants relevant to each theme and subtheme, consistent patterns across interviews, and the generic social processes participants engaged in to make sense of their imposter syndrome experiences. The discussion of each theme and subtheme is included with its respective findings, connecting previous research to the relevant theme and my interpretation of the results. Thus, the findings section

explores how individuals from different backgrounds and marginalized groups experience imposter syndrome differently, illustrating the impact of power dynamics and socialization on their perceptions of competence and belonging. By integrating participants' narratives with theoretical insights, this chapter aims to provide a nuanced understanding of imposter syndrome as an institutional issue, offering practical recommendations for creating more inclusive and supportive academic environments.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1. Why is Imposter Syndrome Important to Explore?

In the field of academia, imposter syndrome has become an ever-growing concern as it disproportionately affects people of colour, women, and those belonging to marginalized ethnic or racial groups (Dasgupta, 2011; McGregor et al., 2008; Chrousos & Mentis, 2020; Clance & Imes, 1978; Ochs, 2022; Omotade et al., 2017). However, studies also show that imposter syndrome can prevail among both men and women (De Vries, 2005; Cowman & Ferrari, 2002; Cozzarelli & Major, 1990, as cited in Cawcutt et al., 2021).

Over time, it adversely affects numerous aspects of people's lives, including their mental health, relationships, career success, and identity development (Ochs, 2022). The constant fear of being exposed as a fraud causes people to micromanage, procrastinate, delay the decision-making process, and not prioritize items because they insist on perfecting every task (Mount & Tardanico, 2016). Considering that it can cascade into multiple spheres of people's lives, there is a growing need to address the root cause of the problem. People with imposter fears may feel uncertain about their abilities to continue succeeding and evade the additional expectations of accepting leadership roles (Sakulku & Alexander, 2011). Positive characteristics of self-identity, such as self-acceptance and regard, perceptions of authenticity, optimism, and respect for others, are all substantially related to academic motivation and achievement (Pajares, 2001: 33).

Academia is characteristic of hierarchal structures, indefinite periods of evaluation and promotion, and perceived competitiveness among colleagues and peers, all of which serve as catalysts for imposter feelings (Vergauwe et al., 2015). Sociological, psychological, and educational research shows that during the transition of new faculty members into the world

of academia, individuals experience isolation, loneliness, problems of gender and race inequalities, and a lack of work-life balance (Alexander & Moore, 2008; Ellison et al., 2014; Youn & Price, 2009). The fear-based, achievement-oriented, and social comparison environment in higher education can easily create a breeding ground for imposter thoughts, feelings, and concerns (Bandura, 1993; Vergauwe et al., 2015; Youn & Price, 2009).

Studies in psychology, medicine, science, and nursing show that studying imposter syndrome in the context of institutional structures is vital as it is associated with different types of psychological distress, including burnout (Clark et al., 2022), depression (Kananifar et al., 2015; Leonhardt et al., 2017; Rohrmann & Leonhardt, 2016; Lester & Moderski, 1995; McGregor et al., 1995; Oriel et al., 2004; Sonnak & Towell, 2001; Chrisman et al., 1995), and anxiety (Gibson & Schwartz, 2008; Kananifar et al., 2015; Bernard et al., 2002; Ross et al., 2001). Consequently, burnout is linked to imposter syndrome in three domains: depersonalization, emotional exhaustion, and low personal accomplishments (Alrayyes et al., 2020). Imposter syndrome frequently co-exists with low self-esteem (Neureiter & Mattausch, 2016; Oriel et al., 2004), somatic symptoms, and social dysfunction (Ares, 2018, as cited in Bravata et al., 2020).

A behavioural science study estimates that 70% of people will experience imposter syndrome at least once in their lives (Sakulku & Alexander, 2011; Abrams, 2018), with educational research showing that imposter syndrome is endemic to higher education (Parkman, 2016, as cited in Evans, 2021). Biomedical research shows it is a debilitating problem across borders and disciplines (Qureshi et al., 2017). A study in environmental research and public health showed that imposter syndrome instigates stress and anxiety and can cause people to surrender their academic careers because they feel they are not good

enough (Woolston, 2016, as cited in Robertson, 2018). Furthermore, it affects people's ability to assess themselves and may influence receptivity to feedback (LaDonna et al., 2018).

Individuals in high-anxiety programs or professions will likely experience imposter feelings (Fraenza, 2016). Bravata et al. (2020) conducted a meta-analysis of the literature on imposter syndrome, which found that employees who continually question their professional legitimacy may be at higher risk of experiencing adverse psychological outcomes and implications for career advancement and retention. They may also feel less satisfied at their jobs and perform poorly. Greater organizational support has minimized the relationship between imposter syndrome and self-reported conflict in managing work-life balance (Crawford et al., 2016).

Imposter syndrome affects individuals across the age spectrum. Some psychological studies report that the older people grow, the less they experience feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt (Chae et al., 1995; Thompson et al., 1998), while other research has not generated an age effect (Lester & Moderski, 1995; Oriel et al., 2004; Want & Kleitman, 2006). Simultaneously, people at advanced career stages also question the validity of their achievements (LaDonna et al., 2018). Psychological, sociological, and medical education research has also found that imposter syndrome is common among African, Asian, and Latino American college students, with these feelings being linked to poor psychological well-being, anxiety, and depression (Bernard et al., 2017; Bernard et al., 2018; Austin et al., 2009; Cokley et al., 2013; Cokley et al., 2017; Cokley et al., 2015; Ewing et al., 1996; Lige & Brown, 2017; Peteet et al., 2015; McClain et al., 2016; Villwock et al., 2016).

The studies mentioned above also explored the factors that may make minority students more vulnerable to heightened psychological stress during their studies, including

racial discrimination, lack of sufficient financial aid leading to the need to work and financially support themselves, and finally, being the first in their families to pursue higher education (Ewing, 1996; Cokley et al., 2013). Contrary to previous research, Cokley et al. (2013), as cited in Bravata et al. (2020), found that the feelings of imposter syndrome were stronger indicators of impaired mental health than the stress of the person's minority status, highlighting instead the individual differences that exist within minority groups, like the presence or absence of imposter feelings (Villwock et al., 2016).

Research in science, psychology, and education shows that students in their later years of education require more care and guidance (Khan et al., 2021). Furthermore, imposter syndrome is mainly prevalent in higher education, especially among postgraduates (King & Cooley, 1995; Bravata et al., 2020), with a study in science showing that 47% of a graduate student population could be clinically diagnosed as depressed (Mousavi et al., 2018). Graduate students are expected to have a certain level of expertise in their fields and high achievements. They are enrolled in programs that follow a stricter and more rigid structure, which could increase the chances of students feeling less equipped to handle the curriculum or performing inadequately. Since becoming a mature student involves identity change and risk (Chapman, 2017), acquiring a sense of belonging to the institution and academia is vital for the transition. Perez (2020) ascertained that graduate students' needs differ as they are more inclined toward professional and career development opportunities, making them less likely to lean toward student organizations or affinity groups that fulfill personal development. Graduate students are also more likely to have dependent families, full-time careers, and other aspects of life, making their struggle more challenging and time-consuming (Perez, 2020).

Breeze (2018) investigated the emotional regimes of inauthenticity, fraudulence, and the paralyzing fear of being exposed in higher education as social, political, and public phenomena. According to the author, neoliberal academia generates new insecurity that propels individuals to work harder, sell themselves better, and compete rather than collaborate. Workers come across imperatives to present a certain kind of enterprising academic self and the promise that if they "perform more," then they will eventually "get there" (Hey, 2001: 80, as cited in Pereira 2016: 105). Breeze (2018) also theorized imposter syndrome as a "diagnostic of power," exploring what can inform us about changes in the governance and structure of higher education and rethinking imposter syndrome as a resource for action and agency in modern education. According to the author, one way of critiquing and rejecting institutional conditions of compulsory and competitive self-promotion is to inevitably fail to live up to impossible standards (Pereira, 2017) but do it strategically, publicly, and collectively. However, this comes with the dilemma of who can afford to fail and how deliberately failing helps fulfill neoliberal universities' disciplinary, performative, and impossible standards.

Some multidisciplinary research has shown that men and women use different coping mechanisms. Internalizing accomplishments among women and ethnic minorities in some disciplines is challenging, adversely impacting their academic performance (Ramsey & Brown, 2018). Aside from high-achieving undergraduate women and faculty members in specific educational programs (Cech et al., 2011), imposter syndrome tends to prevail among mature students (Chapman, 2015), first-generation students (Gardener & Holley, 2011; Pascarella et al., 2004), the economically disadvantaged (Alon, 2007), working-class academics (Loveday, 2016), and ethnic minority students (Peteet et al., 2015; Murphy et al.,

2010, as cited in Ramsey & Brown, 2018) among others. Women are more vulnerable to imposter feelings due to internalized feelings of inadequacy (Lipson et al., 2018; Bravata et al., 2019; Bahn, 2014; Lewis, 2014), which are further reinforced through gender norms.

However, men are more inclined to maladaptive coping strategies, which could potentially lead to health problems (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2016). In some cases, imposter syndrome can also reduce work performance and burnout when people work themselves to the bone and become workaholics (Mount & Tardanico, 2016). Feelings of incompetence and fraudulence and attributing their successes to luck connect to reducing a sense of belonging or the extent to which students feel personally accepted, included, and supported (Chapman, 2017). Imposter syndrome also negatively and significantly influences school belonging through academic resilience (Wu et al., 2022). Safaryazdi (2015) found an inverse relationship between imposter syndrome and resiliency, which shows that the positive behaviours and practical competencies they need to deal with stressful situations are impaired.

2.2. Are There Any Positive Effects of Imposter Syndrome?

While imposter syndrome is notorious for the harmful effects it causes, Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch (2016) found that imposter syndrome can have positive effects because the general fear of being exposed as a fraud can motivate people to work harder. Research from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) further contributed to this idea by finding that people with thoughts related to imposter syndrome tend to compensate for any perceived shortcomings by working extra hard or being exceptional team players (Tewfik, 2022). In this way, these people become more other-oriented and will likely be evaluated as having stronger interpersonal skills. The MIT research found that people with imposter syndrome listened better, showed more empathy, and elicited information well. Tewfik (2022) also claimed that imposter thoughts make people more "other-oriented," in which they become more attuned to other people's perceptions and feelings, making them more likeable. At the same time, while these researchers suggest that imposter syndrome has positive effects, it still does not offset the negative toll it has, considering the adverse impact of imposter syndrome disrupts multiple spheres of people's lives.

2.3. Saving Face & Storytelling

According to Erving Goffman, interactive relationships between people can be described as ritual connections based on rules and values acquired from society. People rely on these rules derived from society to govern their behaviour with others, which helps them save their own faces and the faces of individuals interacting with them. Hence, the term “face” indicates an image of the self in front of others and interaction with them. This type of mutual acceptance is a critical structural factor of interaction, especially in face-to-face conversations. Known for the concept of perception management, he explained that individuals try to control the impressions others form of them by presenting themselves in ways that convey a specific image. This self-presentation that people engage in, how they guide and control the impressions others have of them, and the types of things they would or would not do would help to sustain their "performance" in front of their "audience" form social interactions. When people regulate and control information in social interactions, they do it to achieve a desired public image. They try to control people's impressions of them, especially when they meet others for the first time. According to Goffman (1959), individuals participate in social interactions through a verbal intentional and non-verbal unintentional pattern or "line." If they enact it well, they gain positive social value or "face." People wish to maintain this positive self-image that they present in their social interactions and feel uncomfortable at the thought of not doing so. Those who fail to uphold their social role are considered to lose face, which leads to embarrassment or shame.

Goffman outlined two primary rules of face-saving in interaction, the first being a belief rooted in honour and pride associated with the image of self. This belief makes people want to protect their image from being offended or ridiculed. The second rule revolves around

the importance of protecting other individuals' faces. This will help avoid the embarrassment or "face threat" directed toward oneself if others fail to maintain their face. For example, a person only talking about things they are sure about will help avoid the potential embarrassment of being exposed for giving inaccurate information, which would cause them to "lose face" (Pandarangga, 2015). Discrediting, shame, or social rejection leads to loss of face, which elicits face-saving behaviour. These are attempts to prevent stigma or the lack of full social acceptance (Goffman, 1963a, as cited in Berk, 1977).

Lim & Bowers (1991:420) suggested that the positive face involves two different wants, i.e., the desire to be included (fellowship face) and the want that an individual's abilities be respected (competence face) – which counter the negative face, otherwise known as the want to be unrestricted (autonomy face). In this case, the fellowship face matches the need to belong that people with imposter syndrome often have. As a result, they are less willing to say no to things that would help them establish their place in the system and successfully assimilate into it.

Nair (2019) examined the concept of "saving face" in diplomatic interactions within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The study highlighted the importance of non-verbal cues like gestures and communication strategies in diplomacy, also showing how cultural norms and practices related to saving face were crucial in effective diplomatic engagement within ASEAN. Nair's (2019) research depicts the importance of preserving one's image from humiliation and how social groups operate on a macro-level to avoid face-threat or embarrassment, much like individuals do on a micro-level. In her book *Saving Face in Business: Managing Cross-Cultural Interactions,* Merkin (2017) also echoed the same sentiment about how individuals and organizations navigate cultural differences and achieve

effective communication with counterparts from diverse backgrounds to avoid causing embarrassment or loss of reputation.

Semaan et al. (2017) studied people in high-context societies based on interviews with Iraqi citizens during the Second Gulf War. They found that participants used ICTs to control their image in society and maintain a positive collective identity. Goffman theorized that societal activities heavily shape human nature. People in high-context societies are expected to uphold pride, honour, dignity, and similar values at all times or risk experiencing social exclusion or bringing shame to the family name. Unlike Western societies that prioritize autonomy and individual identity, high-context societies emphasize social connections and collective identity.

The link between saving face and imposter syndrome is that people who are relentlessly doubtful of themselves also lack a sense of belonging and frequently desire to prove that they belong in the space they are in. As a result, their concern with avoiding outcomes that potentially lead to embarrassment and awkwardness is high. This is also tied to impression management, in which people with imposter feelings are heavily affected by what people think of them; thus, creating a positive social image through interactions is particularly important. It is unclear whether they are willing to pretend and play those roles in social interactions that garner them positive face value. However, it is evident through this research that talking about people and places was done more cautiously via careful selection of words.

As far as impression management is concerned, people narrate stories as it is an effective communication tool (Spear and Roper, 2016), helps to create a positive reputation (Roper and Fill, 2012) and shapes public perceptions (Elsbach & Sutton, 1992, as cited in Nosrati & Detlor, 2022). Storytelling has the power to interact, engage, and inspire effectively.

Stories are vital for influencing others (Simmons, 2006) as they can make messages more persuasive and unforgettable and elicit feelings (Forman, 2020). In line with this, narrative transportation is the "why" behind the compelling effect of stories (Green, 2008; Van Laer et al., 2014). The narrative transportation theory states that people who listen to narrations are mentally drawn into the descriptions in a story (Green & Brock, 2000; 2004, as cited in Nosrati & Detlor, 2022).

Other theorists claim that the human brain considers stories more memorable and engaging than plain statements (Snow and Lazauskas, 2018). Considering storytelling is a tool for managing impressions, Felix et al. (2023) conducted a study on 47 CEOs from varying sectors in Brazil. The study highlighted the concept of storytelling identity work, which indicates how narratives strategically create and manage one's identity. It found that new CEOs strategically crafted and shared stories about themselves to manage impressions, form authenticity, and deal with the complexities of their new roles. Hence, storytelling helps shape how others view you and maintains a positive self-image presented in social interactions through these narrations.

The reduction and withdrawal of government investment and the consequential commercialization of research have made university governance increasingly corporate and business-minded (Hoben et al., 2022). Institutions are subject to progressively demanding audit culture, meaning increased measuring and reporting are required on all parts of their working lives. The effect of that is threefold: firstly, instructors at corporate universities have to let go of sound pedagogical practices and instead focus on boosting enrollment and producing new projects. The pressure to raise more research funds and generate more research simultaneously leads to less time and independence to finish research projects. Structural and

policy reforms create these pressures, as do individuals' complicity in internalizing neoliberal identities and practices (Bacevic, 2019).

Through the idea of fairy tales, Hoben et al. (2022) drew attention to how "impostorship" can emerge from an overly self-conscious, critical, and ironical understanding of one's social role and performance, which can disrupt and change cultural settings. The authors focused on new academics and the power of tenure-track positions in validating people's intellectual worth. Hoben et al. (2022) showed how faculty members, much like students, yearn to acquire a sense of belonging, legitimization, and the privileges of getting tenure. Thus, new academics are immediately aware of the institution's power and prestige as well as the inconsistencies between the “back region where the performance of a routine is prepared” and the external area where impressions and appearances are cautiously controlled (Goffman 1959: 239, as cited in Hoben et al., 2022).

This type of double consciousness (Du Bois, 2007) leads to people feeling anxious, fearful of not belonging, and the internal conviction that their inadequacy will be exposed. The fear of not belonging or being a fraud allows systems to exert undue power over people. Hoben et al. (2022) also showed that new university reforms burnt academics out while contending with overwhelmingly impossible demands. Through the top-down demands of producing more and more, academics are expected to keep up with the social construction of the “ideal” academic – a construct whose racialized, gendered, and class dimensions are frequently ignored (Lund, 2018). However, is it really the best idea for individuals to reject their desire for recognition and accept a life of impostorism? That would result in people forging a new sense of identity in the face of ambiguity and again place the onus on individuals.

2.4. Discrimination and Underrepresentation

Exclusionary environments are notorious for producing imposter feelings. The racial microaggressions that people who "invade" space experience at university are a clear reflection of the institutional structures and the discrimination they breed (Puwar, 2004; Johnson & Salisbury, 2018, as cited in Murray et al., 2023). Watson & Betts (2010) used autoethnography to explain that imposter feelings are created within the regulatory framework of masculinity, where the academy's language, policies, rules, regulations, and requirements emerge from a male standpoint (Smith, 2005). The main themes that arose from Watson and Betts' (2010) study were fear, i.e., dread about accomplishing different required tasks; family, i.e., the traditional notion that women will assume the primary caretaker role in the family; and fellowship, i.e., social companionship that enables working towards a shared goal.

In response to the trend of disconnect and invisibility in the academy for doctoral students, study groups assist students in remaining engaged with their learning and satisfied with their advancement through their different Ph.D. programs (Devenish et al., 2009). Women academics undergo evaluations like promotion, tenure, merit, and similar reviews without the same mentorship men receive (Acker, 1997). Multiple educational, psychological, and sociological studies have also shown that women academics struggle more with acquiring a tenure-track position, learning to adopt and then live in the culture of the department/faculty/discipline, developing a pedagogy, and balancing work and domestic demands (Acker, 1997; Acker & Armenti, 2004; Acker & Fluevenger, 1996; Bell, 1990; Kurtz-Costes et al., 2006; Studdard, 2002; Wyn et al., 2000; Zabaleta, 2007; Zorn, 2005). Zorn (2005: p. 8) also highlighted that the university's culture makes it harder to talk about

imposter syndrome, isolating people experiencing it. Entering academia translates to entirely new codes, ways of being, and roles to play (Zorn, 2005, as cited in Waton & Betts, 2010).

According to a sociological study by Evans (2021), being BIPOC and consequently being discriminated against based on race, gender, or any social factor also causes imposter syndrome. Due to the white culture prevalent in higher education, also termed "façade trauma," BIPOC women in graduate school feel they have to act, think and behave in a way that fits that culture (Evans, 2021). Imposter syndrome is also sustained by the "gendered white gaze" (Matias et al. 2019) by internalizing white culture as the norm within the higher education journey.

Furthermore, Jury et al. (2016) looked at the experiences of low socioeconomic status (SES) students in university contexts. The authors found that low SES students face more psychological hurdles, including emotional distress, negative self-perception, and identity management problems, than their high SES peers. Other research has also shown that first-generation students experience imposter feelings more frequently and at higher levels than their non-first-generation counterparts (Peteet, Montgomery, & Weeks, 2015; Martinez et al., 2009; Terenzini et al., 1996). Bias and exclusion worsen feelings of doubt, putting pressure on people from marginalized backgrounds. Students who are outspoken and may have great ideas will think twice and stop sharing opinions and thoughts in a course that requires them to.

Underrepresenting a social group in any institution also contributes to imposter syndrome (Ochs, 2022; Collins et al., 2020). For instance, according to research in science, there is an overall low concentration of women and minorities in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) in America, and non-Hispanic white males constitute most of the individuals identified as engineers or scientists (The National Science Foundation

& National Science Board, 2020). In 2017, working women earned fifty-two percent of all college degrees, with 45% being doctoral degrees in engineering and science. However, they only signified 29% of those working directly in these two fields.

Researchers in America have ascribed this disproportionate distribution to gender discrimination, the disparity in grant opportunities and funding, and inequality in scholarly manuscript reviewing (Ceci & Williams, 2011; Hoppe et al., 2019). One of the authors (2020) narrated her experience as a Black female student in engineering, stating that during and after her transition from STEM practitioner to STEM educator, she felt lost due to the lack of representation of her gender and race.

People who experience imposter feelings are also afraid of confirming negative stereotypes about one's social group. These negative stereotypes are rooted in the ideologies of privilege and oppression, making people of specific skin colours and races feel othered or as if they do not belong. Thus, people who experience this actively seek to contradict those negative stereotypes. This persistence to prove that they belong is often combined with imposter syndrome, creating a hyperawareness of them being othered and altering themselves to be accepted by the dominant group. For example, multidisciplinary research shows that Asian American students are stereotyped as the model minority and deemed hardworking, intelligent, high-achieving, and viewed as free from any emotional or adaptive issues. These stereotypes pressure students to excel and avoid failure, increasing anxiety and distress (Le, 2019).

Edwards (2019) narrated her experience of growing up in a family that gave her immense love and affection and helped her become a first-generation college student. However, her constant encounters with educational environments and messages persistently

negated the foundation that her family established. At the time, Black women with low-income, first-generation backgrounds were rarely ever seen in positions of power and leadership in educational spaces. The news and popular media exacerbated this by negatively depicting people from these communities, highlighting the absence of talents, or neglecting their unique gifts and contributions (Edwards, 2019). People from marginalized backgrounds do not belong because they are not expected to belong. Their presence results from years of grassroots activism and begrudgingly developed legislation, which can only be fixed by fostering various leadership styles in which racial, ethnic, and gender identities are seen as just as professional as the Eurocentric and masculine model (Tulshyan & Burey, 2021).

Andrews (2020) conducted a study on addressing power inequalities and institutional accountability. She talked about how many people are systematically made to feel insecure, lesser-than, and overworked because institutions purposely deflect the need to change. Educational research shows that intellectual work can cause anxiety, and this feeling can also be learned and reinforced through the rituals of academic work (Turner, 2002). University life makes students feel like frauds, including the effect of the campus' climate, which comprises the culture, decisions, practices, policies, and habits. A campus climate's hospitability can determine the degree of comfort or lack thereof that non-whites feel at university (Turner, 2002, p. 77).

A hegemonic white culture isolates anybody who is not a part of it, makes the environment aggressively competitive, and values product over process, all of which would promote imposter syndrome (Parkman, 2016; Barr-Walker et al., 2019). Educational and psychological studies have also found that students primarily expressed fear in their academic performance (Chapman, 2017; Kumar & Jagacinski, 2005). They fear that their professors

will judge them too harshly if their assignments are anything less than perfect. Thus, it increases pressure on themselves and causes anxiety in their confidence and performance (Chapman, 2017, as cited in Le, 2019).

One American researcher spoke of how, despite getting admission into prestigious graduate programs, she always felt that she did not believe in her capabilities to do math because a sixth-grade math teacher told her that she would never be able to pursue the subject (Collins et al., 2020). In that sense, her STEM identity was threatened by "implanted imposter syndrome," as it implanted a fear of risk-taking. Furthermore, during her education, she was told by multiple professors that she did not possess the capability to pursue those subjects. The presence or absence of support and belief in the authors' abilities by those around them was also a factor that rendered them capable or incapable, respectively, of navigating academic life. Lacking the comprehensive and thorough training and knowledge that people receive just by studying in prestigious or specialized schools also contributes to feeling inadequate and incapable of succeeding (Collins et al., 2020).

It is unrealistic to assume that most educators and administrators do not intend to help students from diverse backgrounds. However, there is a difference between intent and impact. While the intention may be to help with candid feedback, certain words, tone, actions, and context can cause disastrous effects on people's self-image and self-belief, which stays with them for a large part of their lives. Edwards (2019) highlighted her interactions with her academic advisor and student support staff member, who was white. She sought guidance to transition into a doctoral program and to pursue her future goals of earning a Ph.D. She was instead informed of her flaws and how these "deficiencies" were reason enough to seek other post-graduation options rather than the one she had in mind. While people like Edwards

(2019) discuss how imposter syndrome served as a motivator to work harder, it still does not offset the adverse effects of imposter syndrome, and neither do all individuals experience the same outcome.

Health-related research shows that organizing workshops that help students recognize imposter syndrome in themselves, their peers, their mentees, and the professors or administrators that propagate it can help nurture a supportive culture in academic advancement (Rivera et al., 2021). Support in the form of lessening course load, improving teaching methods, enabling academic training, and placing appropriate academic stress on students' professional training can greatly promote students' academic performance and provide students with a sense of belonging in universities (Wu et al., 2022).

Multidisciplinary research shows that a positive educational environment can help students alter their thoughts about their capabilities. Denny et al. (2018) narrated one of the subject's struggles with writing due to her intersectional identity and her fear of being perceived as having "terrible grammar." However, the satisfying experience etched in her memory was when she relentlessly doubted her writing and was told by a tutor, "Relax, you are fine. It is not even that bad." This simple evaluation positively affected her because, drawing on his knowledge and expertise to evaluate her paper, the tutor answered her real but implicit question: "Do I belong here?" Denny et al. (2018) study showed that working-class students, especially when they are new to the university, prefer mentors who provide generous and proactive support rather than waiting for them to ask for help and expecting them to be able to articulate their needs. Students also want to feel that they belong, that the university welcomes and supports them, and that their hard work is recognized (Denny et al., 2018).

Steven et al. (2018) conducted a study on Black female students, with the focus group discussions highlighting the idea of being a token student. Some participants expressed that the kind of "diversity fellowship" they received, or the fact that they were the only Black female student in their program, made them feel like they were not chosen for their capabilities but instead for their black identity. Underrepresentation of social groups has previously been tied to students feeling like they were "diversity enhancers," questioning intelligence, facing stereotyping, microaggression, and judgment, and having low self-esteem, among other things (Collins et al., 2020; Chakraverty, 2020; Lige et al., 2016, as cited in Campbell, 2021). Bernard et al. (2020) found that imposter syndrome among Black students was more prevalent in settings that were predominantly non-Black.

Scholars have argued that students with imposter syndrome also feel protective of their racial identities and avoid confirming negative stereotypes about their social group (Le, 2019), as exhibited in the study by Steven et al. (2019). According to Laws (1975), tokenism is a type of false generosity in which a few minority groups are given minimal access to power. It is a tool to pacify them but also to divide and conquer individuals from minoritized communities who do not have the community's alleged insufficiencies. It eventually isolates individuals from their support communities and gives oppressors more power and control over their tokens.

Institutionalized discrimination based on gender, race, ethnicity, etc., breeds imposter syndrome because when people have to fight through those layers, they are subjected to self-doubt about whether they belong in those spaces. Du Bois (1960) developed the concept of "double consciousness," which acknowledged the struggle of Black people in viewing themselves through the eyes of a racist, white society. Du Bois explained how Black folks were at war with themselves by trying to find one identity when they lived in a culture that oppressed

their existence while simultaneously struggling to unite their racial identity with the American identity. As a result, they were double confused, stressed, and second-guessing themselves as they were compelled to see themselves as society viewed and treated them. Du Bois highlighted that since the world looked at Black people, and women in particular, as degraded, mistreated, and dehumanized beings, it was more likely that Black individuals had low self-esteem, which contributed to imposter syndrome.

Racist and sexist stereotypes penetrate academia in a way that causes students from oppressed communities to doubt themselves (Bryant-Davis, 2021, as cited in Campbell, 2021). Considering that students from all backgrounds and experiences feel doubtful of themselves, it raises the question of what negative messages institutions are indirectly or directly sending. Occupying these historically reserved spaces for whites while simultaneously attempting to prove academic excellence breeds self-doubt about one's intellect, making it too easy to ignore apparent, tangible achievements (Campbell, 2021).

Oppressive systems are based on power differentials and power hierarchy, which means their success depends on the buy-in of every individual in the system, especially the ones with the least power, often at the bottom of the hierarchy (Tran, 2023). It is essential to highlight that there are different forms of racism, all of which have some relationship with imposter syndrome. Institutional racism includes racial disparities in accessing opportunities; personally mediated racism consists of the prejudice that people hold and the microaggressions that they enact; and internalized racism involves accepting negative beliefs about one's racial group and enhancing voices from others above ingroup members.

It is imperative to ask how colonialism is connected to imposter syndrome in academia. Tran (2023) highlighted that contrasting imposter syndrome as the opposite of undisputed

confidence (LaDonna et al., 2018) also pathologizes everyone with imposter syndrome, irrespective of their history or context. Through this process, academia attempts to colonize the minds and bodies of people trying to enter and regain their intellectual value and academic space. Thus, imposter syndrome is a tool to ensure that colonized workplaces and disciplines only permit those people who agree to assimilate into the imposed white male culture and standards. As a result, people who do not match the dominant culture and identity must do more than their white male counterparts (Tran, 2023). While there is significant truth in this theory about white privilege and the dominant identity in academia, it does not account for the fact that many white graduate students also experience imposter syndrome intensely and relentlessly, as evidenced in my thesis. It is essential to mention that those students were primarily women, and that is yet another social group that experiences discrimination and prejudice.

2.5. Structural Constraints and Norms

Previous research, like Perez's (2020) study, has shown that graduate students felt the expectations of graduate school were higher, which reportedly contributed more to imposter syndrome. This was viewed as "internal pressure" and was attributed to all kinds of things, including but not limited to the size of the cohort, increased sense of competition, and the underlying belief that accomplishments are equal to the individual's worth. Perez (2020) found that the greater the graduate students' involvement in activities, the greater they felt the need to be "successful," often at the expense of their mental health.

It is worth asking to what level the individual's feelings portray an accurate image of their oppressive situation. Imposter feelings will likely transcend personal traits like performance and intelligence and reflect contextual factors like microaggressions in the environment (Sue et al., 2007). In terms of the link between imposter syndrome and a sense of belonging, Sverdlik et al.'s (2020) longitudinal study also showed that doctoral students who felt more of a sense of belonging to their program or scholarly community reported less imposter syndrome over time. Hence, contextual factors like individuals' sense of belonging must be explored to understand how minoritized people are accepted as they are or are expected to assimilate. For example, for some academics of colour, elements like productivity and intelligence alone have not guaranteed promotions and tenure (Flaherty, 2022).

Scholarly work and interventions solely aimed at "fixing" the individual do not account for things outside the person's control. Lorde (1983) highlighted that oppressive systems like patriarchy keep people occupied with the oppressor's concerns over their own, which makes individuals undertake problems they did not create and blame them for those problems and resulting consequences. Those in power and dominant groups create oppressive situations, and

thus, oppressed individuals are in a constant state of having to choose between their liberation and survival (Tran, 2023).

Tran (2023) highlighted three factors that further the oppressive hierarchy based on power and privilege in academia. The first was internalized oppression, in which people willingly stay at the bottom of the pyramid. The second factor maintaining power hierarchies was interpersonal mechanisms, which include advising those on the bottom to "ignore" or reduce discrimination experiences and focus on working hard instead. This kind of intentional silence is not just intended to avoid conflict and maintain peace but to propagate the idea that silence will protect the individual until they hold higher positions of power. Reward structures and false generosity were the third factors in maintaining the unjust status quo. This refers to when underprivileged people continue to work against their liberation and oppressive situation as they fear losing the little bit of privilege and freedom they are currently getting after a lot of hard work and struggle. This fear is not unfounded, as Taylor et al.'s (2018) study showed that after female athletic faculty members reported incidences of harassment, their workplaces became even more hostile.

According to Tran (2023), imposter syndrome and other individualistic pathologies gaslight people who experience relentless inadequacy and make it a problem they must solve. She reworded imposter syndrome to "infiltrator experience," stating that it pathologizes the victim and blames them for their circumstances (Ryan, 1971). Tran (2023) urged readers to consider that if a minoritized person is victim-blaming, considering who holds the privilege and power and creating awareness to start decolonizing the self is imperative. This process would also bring the individual back into the community with other "infiltrators" to create collective self-appreciation, awareness of oppression, and a shared desire for change. In this way,

individuals are expected to participate to achieve critical consciousness but are not shouldering the burden on their own.

Ochs (2022) studied the law school "caste system" to investigate how hierarchal structures cause inequality and imposter syndrome among certain professors. The study found that, among other factors, imposter syndrome was attributed to classist treatment, including recurring microaggressions from students and colleagues. When faculty or other students demonstrate, directly or indirectly, through their actions that specific individuals are not qualified, this reduces confidence, builds up microaggressions, and contributes to imposter syndrome (Ochs, 2022).

Multidisciplinary research has shown that the relationships students develop during their early college years can directly impact their academic performance (Le, 2019). People may internalize inadequacy when they see their peers becoming successful (Evans, 2021). Faculty associate themselves as mentors to students when they are thriving. However, they withdraw when the student encounters a failure, making them feel responsible for their inadequacy and taking the onus away from the academic environment that may contribute to it (Blockett, 2016, as cited in Evans, 2021). The fact that professors also experience imposter syndrome shows that these feelings experienced by graduate students can carry over after graduation and continue to have adverse consequences.

In contrast, being open with people who have experienced or are still undergoing similar issues and struggling in the same way bonds people together and helps them figure things out together. Institutions with professors and administrators willing to provide academic mentoring to struggling students directly positively impact students' self-doubt (Gander, 2013, as cited in Akerman, 2020). This is because mentors and peers with the same

in-group feelings or experiences can "socially vaccinate" against adverse self-perceptions if people identify with them (Dasgupta, 2011, as cited in Robertson, 2018).

People who have toiled in the same or similar manner can relate and see themselves in their students and, hence, help students navigate the formal and hidden curriculum like nobody else. Narrating the lived experiences of four women of colour in STEM in America highlights a disconnect between STEM talents and their appreciation within formal education, which propagates imposter syndrome in women of colour. This development is further incited by a culture-blind curriculum and poorly trained or unresponsive educators (Collins et al., 2020).

Conversation about imposter feelings is crucial as it normalizes perceived failure or problematic emotions, but only so much can come from talking about it (Murray et al., 2023). Wong et al. (2022) acknowledged that universities may not always be a safe space to discuss racism and issues of marginality. Breeze et al. (2022) cautioned that ‘public confessions’ of self-doubt and inadequacy put marginalized people at risk and re-established the idea that imposter syndrome is an individual issue. Hence, open discussions and peer support should not be considered a replacement for addressing structural inequalities (Murray et al., 2023).

Another structural factor connected to imposter syndrome was the COVID-19 pandemic. Savya et al. (2022) showed that the lockdown's essential features, including social isolation and remote work, worsened feelings of isolation and self-doubt. Interestingly, the same effect was seen in Bedwell & B.J.'s (2022) study in which the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated feelings of imposter syndrome among secondary educators. A sudden transition to remote teaching, concerns about student learning outcomes, and increased workload contributed to heightened imposter feelings. Kang (2021) explained that virtual learning deprived students of physical interaction with faculty members and classmates, resulting in

loneliness and isolation. However, it was more challenging for students in their first years because they had never seen their professors and peers face-to-face, making them feel even more unsure and uncertain.

Students tend to have trouble establishing a strong sense of connection in their early days of university (Christie et al., 2008, as cited in Pownall et al., 2022), but that can have a lasting impact on their university careers (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Humphrey & Lowe, 2017; Read et al., 2003). Therefore, it is evident why the pandemic impacted students' sense of belonging to their academic environment and support networks, especially with more individuals taking up caring responsibilities and battling with financial precarity alongside a lack of social connection (Lederer et al., 2020). Ramsey & Brown (2018) highlighted that a strong sense of belonging has a link to the feeling that students "deserve" or have "earned" their place in the university.

Furthermore, like any other social institution, family structure shapes people's personalities, habits, thoughts, and values. Multidisciplinary studies show that students' view of themselves as scholars and their commitment to their profession often rely heavily on their family background and support (Parkman, 2016, p. 53; Clance & Imes, 1978). How a student will come to comprehend their experiences in higher education will frequently be shaped by early family interactions and family dynamics. This notion uses attachment theory as a framework to explain how, akin to any social institution, families are exposed to and impacted by gender norms and white cultural hegemony. The cultural capital and socialization within the family can differ from the socialization within academia, which can cause conflict for BIPOC students (Evans, 2021). Highly demanding families that do not have realistic and healthy expectations from their children also tend to breed imposter syndrome, as parents'

love may be equated to acquiring a specific number or kind of awards or titles (Want & Kleitman, 2006, as cited in Chrousos et al., 2020).

Researchers in Finland studied the doctoral student population and found that the influence of childhood family extended to doctoral education (Nori et al., 2020). As a result, some Ph.D. students from low-educated families experienced imposter syndrome about their fellow students and postgraduate studies. However, many mature doctoral students became empowered enough to rely more on their abilities than their family backgrounds, showing that the influence of family circumstances reduced with age and life experiences (Nori et al., 2020).

Millennials are frequently criticized in the literature and labelled as a generation of "trophy kids" who demand relentless praise. Multidisciplinary research like Tulgan's (2009) study shows that these inclinations in college-age students stem from "helicopter parents" who pampered their children and approved of their unique talents and distinctiveness, forming inflated self-esteem in their capabilities (Tulgan, 2009). While they are more agentic than previous generations, they are paradoxically exposed to more significant structural constraints, including more competition for jobs requiring a CV studded with accomplishments (McAllum, 2016). Due to grade-related stress that drives many millennials to depression (Wynaden et al., S. (2013), students question the notion that college admission confirms that a person is equal to the task (Wilson & Gerber, 2008). As a result, millennial students either study excessively to prove their abilities to themselves and others or become paralyzed by incompetence and decline to take risks.

2.6. Organizational Definition of Failure

Where the definition of success and failure comes from in academia is unclear. Still, these categorizations immensely impact students' self-doubt and inadequacy. Students have a heightened fear of dealing with the judgment of their peer group and the academic staff, but also the difficulty in "getting started" and "letting go" of their written work. Furthermore, students who do not have a relevant background or a formal credential in their subject areas tend to feel more incompetent and doubtful about their abilities (Barr-Walker et al., 2019, as cited in Andrews, 2020). Bothello and Roulet (2019) identified certain induction rituals in management academia, including a focus on outputs, otherwise known as the "publish or perish" culture. It serves as an accidental signal to budding scholars that the value of academic work is in identifiable results or the number of publications. These rituals are taught during the Ph.D., job market, and tenure process, indoctrinating doctoral students to cut corners, leaving many students to feel like they are a jack of trades and master of none at the culmination of their theses.

The process of academic writing for academics involves drafting and redrafting text based on reviewers' feedback, and, as a result, goes on for many iterations until the piece is deemed as "finished." However, students feel differently and instead think that once their essay has been submitted, it is irretrievable, "final," and marked accordingly. Because of this, they feel that they must perfect it before they hand it in or "let it go." The finality of it increases the fear factor at precisely the time when students are still acquiring the required literacy skills and learning about academic writing (Chapman, 2017). Lewis Elton's (2010) study in England suggested that gaining a deeper understanding of words and discussing their work with their lecturers can help them overcome these challenges of academic writing.

Management research suggests that the supervisor-student dyad should be broken, and supervisors should grant their students the liberty to wander intellectually and develop distinctive identities as scholars (Bothello & Roulet, 2019). Making fieldwork compulsory has also been shown to make individuals noticeably more self-assured and motivated than their peers and, hence, less likely to experience imposter syndrome. Higher education establishments must build a culture of indulgence and benevolence in academia (Bothello & Roulet, 2019).

Studies in culture and education show that concealing imposter syndrome and being mindful of negative cultural stereotypes are forms of stereotype threat associated with the fear of being seen as a failure (Edwards, 2019). Coined by Steele and Aronson in 1995, stereotype threat is when people feel at risk of confirming a negative stereotype about their social group. Since these people are mindful of the adverse stereotypes linked to their social group, they actively seek to refute those negative ideas and labels. Having certain flaws and errors evokes societal chastisement and is not accepted as fundamental to the human experience, which compels people to protect a façade of perfection. The fact that failure is not assumed to be an ordinary and subjective aspect of reality, that everybody fails, and that it means different things to different people, such that people with imposter syndrome and stereotype threat tend to consider them outliers. Assuming that failure is a self-defined, unavoidable part of human nature is, in fact, vital for growth.

In a sociological study, Haas & Shaffir (1977) introduced the idea of a cloak of competence as a crucial part of the professionalizing process. They found that medical school socialization involves two problematic sets of expectations and reactions: one is related to the future, i.e., the aspiring professional has to successfully meet the (sometimes exaggerated)

expectations of clients and outsiders who put the physician in a demi-god role; and the other is immediate, i.e., medical students must successfully negotiate the socialization experience by meeting varying expectations and reactions of student, staff, and faculty, who control student reputation and success. As they try to learn the expected range of competencies, they collectively perceive that there is too much to know and barely enough time to learn. Hence, as they move through the program, students learn the beliefs and practices of the profession, using and manipulating the symbols to enact a set of images defining them as competent in their fields (Haas & Shaffir, 1977).

Murray et al. (2023) found that the transition to university and exams automatically increases imposter feelings among students. Thus, they suggested more active student support services during this time, including more cohort-building on degree programmes, substituting high-stakes exams with developmental analysis, and offering clear induction materials at the beginning of university. However, since imposter feelings can easily continue beyond this point, the authors suggested better support through teaching staff, tutors, student counselling and disability support.

2.7. Summary of Literature

The work on saving face and impression management is vital to discussing imposter syndrome as a sociological issue because it impacts people's self-esteem, mental health, and identity development. Individuals who feel relentlessly inadequate due to the subtle exclusionary environment in academia aspire to assimilate into the system successfully. As a result, they overcompensate by adhering to social norms like the prevalent overworking culture, preventing them from being ostracized or humiliated. This further strengthens my argument that structural factors in academia adversely affect people's self-esteem. As

observed in my thesis, the impact of these aspirations to successfully integrate into the culture was so intense among graduate students that they were conscious of not being negatively perceived while talking about people and places. Therefore, this link between saving face and imposter syndrome highlights a vicious cycle where students aspire to be "successful" in assimilating into academia's established culture. However, in choosing to survive the demanding nature of the system, they reinforce the hold academia has on them.

The difference between individualistic and sociological perspectives on imposter syndrome is that the latter does not dismiss the importance of situational context on people's self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy. As Murray et al. (2023) and Tran (2023) emphasized through their research, the dynamic between people and social contexts is essential to consider, as many factors outside of the individual's control impact people's imposter feelings. This could also create errors in judgment, considering different contexts, groups, and experiences lead to shared meanings. Thus, if external factors are removed from the discussion on imposter syndrome, it would offer a tunnel vision of people's experiences and not account for the meanings individuals ascribed to their feelings of imposter syndrome. Thus, the critical difference between both perspectives on imposter syndrome is the source of the problem and the approach to solutions – sociological viewpoints consider imposter syndrome as a product of external factors and, hence, call for systemic change.

Furthermore, structural factors like discrimination, underrepresentation, and organizational definitions of failure must be addressed because, as evidenced through my participants' narrations in the findings section, they significantly affected people's self-perception, mental health, relationships, career success and identity development. To assimilate into the system successfully, students focused excessively on the "should-be"

aspect as part of the "single definition of success" highlighted in chapter four. Thus, many of them silently experienced discrimination and exploitation for fear of being penalized or "failing" to follow instructions. As Bacevic (2019) pointed out, structural elements create pressures in academia, like individuals' involvement in internalizing neoliberal identities does.

This discrimination, underrepresentation and other institutional constraints made them feel like they did not belong in graduate school, which shows an explicit link between imposter syndrome and structural factors. This is because discrimination and underrepresentation create environments where marginalized individuals feel less supported and more scrutinized, exacerbating feelings of imposter syndrome. Structural constraints and oppressive institutional norms can limit opportunities for success and reinforce a narrow definition of competence, making it harder for individuals to feel validated.

Additionally, the fact that participants in my study were willing to succumb to negative cultural aspects of academia only to achieve their goal of being successful shows how significant it is to study imposter syndrome from an institutional perspective. In a nutshell, studying imposter syndrome through a sociological lens emphasizes the role of systemic factors in creating and sustaining these feelings, shifting the focus from individual shortcomings to broader institutional practices that need to be addressed to foster a more inclusive and supportive environment.

Therefore, the literature on imposter syndrome hangs together by tying how structural elements like discrimination, structural norms, underrepresentation and organizational definition of success create a culture in academia that provokes people to think a certain way about themselves and others no matter what they achieve. It highlights the neoliberal thinking that structural factors are not to blame for the self-doubt that plagues students (and faculty)

and how interactions expose microaggressions based on a colonialist and discriminatory mindset.

The literature on imposter syndrome connects to my research questions in multiple ways. For instance, the question of institutional and cultural norms that propagate imposter syndrome is answered through the idea of self-presentation. Like individuals, universities engage in impression management and promote a polished image, increasing pressure to conform to *ideal* academic standards that can heighten self-doubt and imposter syndrome. Literature on saving face also explains that corporate-like governance and the pressure to produce measurable outputs constantly contribute to feelings of inadequacy. The theme of saving face also answers the research question on backgrounds that individuals are primed to maintain their public image through socialization, which can amplify self-doubt when they fear not meeting societal expectations. In addition, the desire to belong and be respected makes individuals more susceptible to imposter feelings, especially when societal norms emphasize achievement and competence. In terms of navigating marginalization, research on saving face sheds light on power dynamics when marginalized groups face additional scrutiny and navigating power structures that can reinforce feelings of not belonging. Regarding the differences between Canadian and international students, the literature does not highlight a distinction between these two students in their experiences of imposter syndrome; however, it does emphasize that differences in socialization processes can influence how students from diverse backgrounds experience and cope with imposter syndrome.

The section on discrimination and underrepresentation answers the research question on institutional and cultural norms by highlighting how exclusionary environments, racial microaggressions and regulatory frameworks based on masculinity propagate imposter

feelings. University cultures, often dominated by white and male perspectives, create additional barriers for marginalized groups. The second research question on backgrounds and socialization is answered through the studies that show how the lack of mentorship for women and BIPOC individuals creates vulnerability to imposter syndrome. Additionally, first-generation and low socioeconomic-status students tend to face more psychological distress due to their backgrounds. In terms of navigating marginalization, tokenism and lack of representation exacerbate the challenges of dealing with institutional power dynamics and discrimination, leading to persistent imposter feelings. The lack of representation, particularly in STEM fields, contributes to self-doubt as minoritized individuals struggle to see themselves in that space. In terms of backgrounds and socialization, the "gendered white gaze" and the need to conform to white cultural norms worsens imposter feelings. Due to racial and gender discrimination and identity management issues coupled with negative self-perceptions, BIPOC students and first-generation and low socioeconomic status students, respectively, experience higher levels of imposter syndrome.

The section on structural constraints and norms shows that academia often imposes overly demanding expectations and pressures on students, where success is equated to self-worth. Microaggressions and a lack of belonging, thus, amplify imposter syndrome. In terms of backgrounds and socialization, traditional family expectations shape people's vulnerability to imposter syndrome, with early socialization and family dynamics significantly impacting students' academic self-perception. Moreover, marginalized individuals contend with internal oppression, silence around discrimination, and power hierarchies, all of which contribute to isolation and self-doubt.

Finally, the literature on the organizational definition of failure shows that academia's emphasis on high-stakes output, the finality of submissions, and maintaining a façade of competence propagates self-doubt and inadequacy. Not to mention, non-traditional backgrounds, lack of formal credentials, and professional socialization in fields like medicine make people more vulnerable to imposter syndrome. In terms of navigating marginalization, stereotype threats and the need to appear competent force marginalized groups to hide their imperfections, navigating power dynamics that cultivate isolation. In fact, stereotype threats and higher stakes during university transitions pose unique challenges for students, which calls for tailored support to overcome imposter syndrome.

Chapter 3: Methods

3.1. Theoretical Framework

I adopted the perspective of symbolic interactionism originating in the works of George Herbert Mead (1934), who claimed that people create their own social reality through individual and collective action. He argued that individuals' sense of self emerges through their interactions with others and society. Symbolic interactionists believe in the significance of everyday interactions which occur through meaningful objects in people's lives, including relationships, symbols, material things, and actions. In this way, people create and interpret the world around them, which is vital in exchanging meanings and forming social identities. Moreover, Herbert Blumer's (1986) three basic premises for human interaction guide this research. The first premise states that people's actions toward their goals are guided by the meanings they ascribe to them; therefore, what they believe or think about something is ingrained in their meaning. The second premise proposes that the meaning of things is drawn from or emerges from the individual's interactions with society. Thus, the meaning of things, whether it is beliefs or material things, differs from society to society. The third premise is that these meanings change through an interactive and interpretative process the person uses to deal with the things they encounter.

I chose symbolic interactionism as my theoretical perspective, as it provides a deeper understanding of the complexities of imposter syndrome and the nuanced way individuals communicate and construct their social realities. People act towards things based on the meanings assigned to them, which are derived from social processes and social interactions (Blumer, 1937). Considering macro structures reveal themselves in micro-interactions, studying imposter syndrome at the micro level can help us understand how structure impacts

people. The personal decisions a person makes do not exist in a vacuum. Instead, cultural patterns and social forces in the form of social structures affect individual-level interactions. In his idea of the sociological imagination, Mills (1959) gave the example of how society attributes one person's unemployment status in a large city to private problems. However, when a large proportion of the population is unemployed, this is seen by people as a public issue that requires investigation (van den Hoonaard & van den Scott, 2021, p36). Thus, we can actually study, on the ground, how structure influences individuals and how their identities are formed and transformed in a social context. Considering humans are social beings rather than individualistic beings, we cannot understand their actions without also considering the social context in which that person exists (van den Hoonaard & van den Scott, 2021, p25).

3.2. Research Design

This chapter will explain my research aims and why I chose a qualitative methodology. It will detail my research design, philosophy, strategy, time horizon, sampling, data collection method, and finally, the data analysis method, and justify why I made each of these choices. Firstly, my study focused on structural factors in academia that propagate feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt in academia. It also revolved around the subjective experiences of imposter syndrome among graduate students from different genders and races, with the strategies they adopted to deal with these pervasive feelings.

I chose a qualitative methodology to investigate the generic social processes involved in people's experiences of imposter syndrome. This is because qualitative methods such as interviews are useful in understanding the nuances of how people perceive and internalize feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. Aside from personal narratives and emotional insights,

this methodology allowed me to examine how specific environments, cultural norms, and interactions with peers, mentors, and authority figures influence imposter feelings. Interviews also helped me explore how meanings are constructed through social interactions and how these meanings shape individuals' self-concepts. A qualitative approach also allowed me to analyze shared experiences that suggested systemic issues within academic settings. Given the flexibility and iterative process of a qualitative methodology, I had the liberty to refine my questions and focus areas as new insights emerged. This open-ended nature of qualitative research also allowed participants to bring up issues and perspectives that I might not have initially considered. My research design chose an interpretive philosophy as I aimed to understand the subjective meanings that people attach to their experiences of imposter syndrome concerning their contexts and social worlds. Rather than generalizing findings to a larger population, I focused on the social construction of reality, which could best be done through an interpretive approach.

The research I conducted was inductive in nature, which suited my topic, considering I was aiming for a deeper, contextual understanding of imposter syndrome, rich theoretical insights, and the exploration of new areas, particularly the link between saving face and imposter syndrome. I also wanted to have a flexible design to follow the data wherever it leads me and adjust my focus according to the insights that emerge. This research type was also useful as it allowed me to develop a nuanced understanding of structural factors and the meaning-making process of imposter syndrome that would have otherwise been missed.

The research strategies I adopted were a mix of narrative inquiry and phenomenology. Narrative analysis is a qualitative research method that focuses on the stories people tell to make sense of their experiences. By examining these narratives, researchers can uncover how

individuals construct their identities and interpret their social worlds (Riessman, 2008). This method is particularly useful for understanding personal and social identities, as it considers the context and structure of the stories told. Narrative analysis looks at the content, structure, and function of narratives, revealing how they shape and are shaped by social and cultural norms. Phenomenology, on the other hand, aims to describe and interpret individuals' lived experiences. It seeks to understand phenomena from the perspective of those experiencing them, emphasizing the subjective experiences and the meanings individuals ascribe to them (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenological research involves deep, detailed interviews and reflective analysis to capture the subjective meanings and essences of experiences.

Narrative inquiry was suitable for my research as I wanted to explore the stories people tell about their experiences of imposter syndrome and its impact on their lives (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). Phenomenology was equally appropriate as I aimed for a deeper understanding of the subjective meanings people attach to their experiences of imposter syndrome. All of the data for my thesis was collected at one point in time, mainly because I wanted to explore the generic social processes currently at work rather than overtime.

Thematic analysis is another qualitative approach that identifies and analyzes patterns or themes within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). While it shares similarities with narrative analysis, thematic analysis focuses on coding and categorizing data to find recurring themes across different narratives. In my thesis, thematic analysis can complement narrative analysis and phenomenology by systematically identifying common themes related to imposter syndrome across various narratives. This approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the institutional factors contributing to imposter syndrome, highlighting recurring patterns in participants' experiences.

While narrative and thematic analysis are distinct methodologies, they can be used together to provide a richer, more nuanced understanding of imposter syndrome. Narrative analysis offers in-depth insights into individual stories and their meanings, while thematic analysis provides a broader view of common patterns and themes across multiple narratives. By integrating these approaches, my thesis can offer detailed, context-specific insights and overarching themes illuminating how imposter syndrome functions as an institutional issue.

With regard to the data collection method, I spoke to twenty graduate students from Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN) via semi-structured interviews to uncover the meaning behind their experiences of imposter syndrome (Rowley, 2012). I chose to study graduate students because transitioning into a mature student involves risk and identity change (Chapman, 2017). This process requires a sense of belonging to the institution in which academia plays a crucial role. Graduate students also have different career and professional development needs, making them less inclined to turn toward groups that fulfill personal development. Since they are more likely to have full-time jobs and dependent families, their struggles are more time-consuming and demanding (Perez, 2020). Thus, there is a higher likelihood that graduate students will experience imposter syndrome.

I chose the following three faculties: Engineering, Science and Humanities and Social Science because imposter syndrome tends to be rife in the traditional sciences (Cokley et al., 2017; Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2016; Mullangi & Jagsi, 2019; Woolston, 2017). Research has shown that this is mainly due to high-pressure environments, underrepresentation and stereotype threat, objective measures of success that lead to self-comparison, and isolation with a lack of mentorship. Additionally, I selected HSS mainly because of voluntary participation and ease of access. I ended up having participants from the Faculty of Business,

interdisciplinary programs, and the Marine Institute, as students from these areas wanted to share their experiences of imposter syndrome. Aside from practicalities and resource constraints, my goal was to examine specific instances and allow broader generalizations to emerge, so a probability sampling approach would not suit my research aims.

I chose in-depth semi-structured interviews to ensure I could be surprised by what I found. In-depth interviews also helped to elicit narrative data (Kvale, 1993; 2003) and allow people to explain their experiences, feelings, attitudes, and definitions of the situation in ways that are meaningful to them (van den Hoonaard & van den Scott, 2021, p109). The rationale behind solely choosing an academic setting was to ensure that the scope of the research was practical and feasible and to determine how the culture of academia breeds feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy. I chose in-depth interviews to collect data as they were ideal for gathering detailed descriptions of participants' lived experiences of imposter syndrome. Interviews were also suitable for my research goals as I wanted to collect narratives and understand how people make sense of their experiences through storytelling. Interviews also helped explore the temporal and contextual aspects of personal and social experiences of imposter syndrome.

Furthermore, I used a semi-structured design as these types of interviews create guiding questions with some space for other topics that arise during the conversation (Crabtree & DiCicco-Bloom, 2006). Semi-structured interviews also helped elicit storytelling that gave depth to the unique experiences of imposter syndrome among graduate students. Finally, this structure aligned with a symbolic interactionist approach by providing flexibility to explore personal meanings, the depth to understand social interactions and contexts, and the richness of data necessary for interpretive analysis.

To recruit participants for my study, I contacted graduate coordinators and asked them to email graduate students from their respective departments. The purpose was to inform them of who I am, the purpose of my research, and how long the interview would potentially take with the assurance of maintaining confidentiality. Regarding the interview schedule, I did not use jargon to avoid confusing my subjects. Before conducting the interviews, the questions went through proper examination for any leading or implicit assumptions, inviting yes/no answers or being too vague, general, or invasive (Rowley, 2012). The average duration of the interviews was 45 minutes to an hour, depending on how much time the participants could give, how much they were willing to share their experiences, and the time allowed for eventualities. During the interview, I made relevant comments in between that would help the interviewees generate situational accounts of their experiences and thoughts regarding imposter syndrome.

I chose thematic analysis to evaluate my data because it had enough flexibility and depth to explore a wide range of data from the interview transcripts (Braun and Clarke, 2012: p58). It also helped me systematically identify and analyze context-specific and recurring patterns in the data, which represent the shared meanings and symbols people ascribed to their experiences of imposter syndrome. The thematic analysis also aligned with my research goals by uncovering the underlying messages and structures of participants' stories and simultaneously capturing the essence of people's lived experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2012: p57). It was also valuable in revealing both individual and collective narratives of imposter syndrome, thus providing insight into how personal stories reflect broader social and cultural contexts in academia. My analysis showed the explicit and implied ideas that participants shared during the interview about their experiences of imposter syndrome and the influence of

structural factors that propagated relentless self-doubt among high-achieving graduate students. It also indicated the recognized and intended consequences (manifest) versus unrecognized and unintended effects (latent) of education. For example, while a manifest function of academia is to advance knowledge in different fields, a latent function is to reinforce colonialist and white supremacist ideals that breed discrimination, mental health issues and imposter syndrome. Using pseudonyms to conceal identities, I included direct quotes from participants most relevant to each theme to illustrate key points and provide context, drawing comparisons between past literature on imposter syndrome and this study.

Using AI to transcribe the data, I listened to the recordings multiple times to edit the transcriptions. I simultaneously noted my observations and thoughts as part of the memoing process. I read and re-read the transcriptions to familiarize myself with the data, link critical themes from the research into a coherent narrative and uncover the meaning behind people's experiences of imposter syndrome (Rowley, 2012). Then, I coded the transcriptions by assigning descriptive labels so that different segments represented meaningful ideas and concepts. Subsequently, I grouped related codes into broader categories or themes that emerged from patterns consistent across interviews, which helped me organize and interpret the data. After developing the themes, I analyzed and interpreted the data within the context of my research questions by identifying relationships between themes, exploring variations within the data, and drawing conclusions based on the findings. I also did a comparative analysis of the experiences and perspectives of participants to explore differences and similarities and the range of views on different topics within the ambit of imposter syndrome.

Considering the qualitative nature of the study, I interviewed 20 graduate students to explore the meaning behind their experiences of imposter syndrome. While it provided deep insight into the meaning-making process and the structural interplay in academia, there is an unequal representation of genders, Canadian vs. international students and Indigenous status, with only three male participants, one Indigenous student, and a focus on graduate students and selected faculties. It was challenging to access voluntary male participation, with some of them initially replying to the call for recruitment and then not responding when I attempted to set up an interview time. As a result, the disproportionality may not capture the full range of experiences across all academic disciplines, genders, or of undergraduate students and faculty members. It may also affect the transferability of the findings to other fields or institutions.

However, it is also important to highlight that the goal of this inductive study was not to seek representation or generalization. Instead, it was to delve into the subjective meaning and interpretation behind people's experiences and feelings of inadequacy while paying attention to generic social processes that have common elements of a process shared across populations (Prus, 1986). I also chose to prioritize voluntary participation because that would not just abide by ethics but also derive the most authentic narrations. Nonetheless, one of the measures I took to enhance the applicability of my findings was to select students based on the theoretical relevance of the research questions. I also explicitly describe the context of my study in this report so that readers can assess the relevance of my findings to other contexts.

3.3. Ethical Considerations

Self-reporting bias may affect the data's validity as participants may have been reluctant to fully disclose their sentiments and experiences due to concerns about confidentiality, social desirability bias and the knowledge of being recorded. However, after gaining approval from the ethics review board, I further addressed ethical issues in my research by clearly informing participants at the beginning of the interview about what would be required of them. I also maintained strict confidentiality and anonymity of participant data by handling the data myself and storing it in a private space. Additionally, conducting in-depth interviews was time-consuming and resource-intensive. With limited time and access to participants, the scope of the study had to be restricted to academia, certain faculties, and graduate students. Even then, I did the data collection process single-handedly, finishing coding and thematic analysis without using a software. Moreover, even without a research team and the time it took for the ethics application to be processed, I still completed all twenty interviews within a few weeks because people were constantly reaching out to participate. As a researcher, my perspectives, beliefs, assumptions, and experience of imposter syndrome might have affected the interpretation and analysis of the data. Having said that, I adhered to established methodological frameworks and protocols to maintain consistency and minimize subjective interpretation. Moreover, creating memos helped me reflexively explore researcher bias's potential influence on data collection and analysis.

It is possible that using the term "imposter syndrome" rather than "infiltrator experience" (Tran, 2023) or "imposter phenomenon" may have led to some misinterpretations by the participants, considering the term "syndrome" may be viewed as a medical diagnosis and classified as an illness (Campbell, 2021). This could potentially cause some participants

to discuss imposter syndrome as an illness or disease. However, I used this term to maintain consistency in terminology (Campbell, 2021) because it was initially introduced by Clance and Imes (1978) as the same, and it is a vernacular term in everyday use. In some interviews, I asked either-or questions and asked participants to provide examples of instances when their imposter syndrome was "triggered" by anything external. The binary nature of such questions and using the word "trigger" could have been avoided as it may have potentially influenced their view of imposter syndrome as being a state or being elicited by something. The fact that they were being recorded might have prompted them to leave out information that could have been valuable to the research topic and influenced the accuracy of their narrations. There is also a possibility that some of the participants may have been reluctant to share certain things due to the differences in gender between them and me and the uneasiness that might accompany it. At the same time, the value of this research also lies in what is being implied through their discomfort and reluctance. It further strengthens my argument as it points to the institutional culture and norms responsible for creating a safe environment or a lack thereof.

To navigate my role as an insider and avoid potential bias, I used reflexive journaling to reflect on how my position influenced my research. For example, as I went from one interview to another, I made it a point to reduce my own talking time and sharing of experiences, as that would affect the organic direction the conversation would take otherwise. Another method I adopted to deal with my role as an insider was to clearly communicate the voluntary nature of their participation and the confidentiality measures in place. This helped build trust and address power dynamics, preventing participants from feeling pressured to share information. Regarding the considerations that go into presenting my findings and quotes in written documents, I evaluated whether the information was necessary to elucidate

the theme in question. I left out anything identifiable, like names, degree subjects, occupations, etc., when those sample traits were in the minority. While presenting findings, I also wanted to honour contextual sensitivity, so I returned to the recordings multiple times to determine the accuracy of interpreting participant narrations. To maintain confidentiality, I read out the consent form at the beginning of the interviews that explained the use of data, confidentiality measures, and participants' rights. To protect sensitive information such as personal identifiers, detailed personal stories, and any data that could lead to participant identification, I transcribed, coded, and analyzed it myself and not through any other researcher to restrict access to data. I also ensured that all data was anonymized before analysis and presentation. It is essential to mention that I have not included much demographic information because it is a smaller community and institution than most. To maintain confidentiality, I used pseudonyms and only included the academic faculty and region from where participants are from.

Therefore, while the study includes limitations that come with qualitative research or the time and access issues typical to an MA thesis, it still holds immense value. Exploring the depth and complexity of human experiences, social phenomena, and cultural contexts allows insights and theories to emerge from the data. By closely examining imposter syndrome as a sociological problem in academia, my research allows broader generalizations to emerge from these observations.

Chapter 4: Results

4.1. Saving Face, Assigning Blame as a Social Process

4.1.1. Neoliberal Thinking

Assigning blame acknowledges the pattern of participants finding it difficult to view imposter syndrome as an externally-produced feeling. The idea of structural factors having less to no effect on their imposter syndrome reflects the neoliberal thinking prevalent among graduate students. Participants only attributed the cause of their imposter syndrome to environmental factors when I categorically asked them about any external aspects propagating feelings of inadequacy. They kept returning to all the areas *they* lacked and how those reasons were to blame for their self-doubt.

Moreover, some students would assign blame to structural factors when they had had a negative experience either in university or in their personal lives. Otherwise, they would attribute their self-inadequacy and imposter feelings to individual factors like a mental health diagnosis, negative thoughts, coming out, social anxiety, or not having as much financial backing as other people. Multiple students connected their mental health diagnosis to imposter syndrome, which can also direct and perhaps mislead future research to investigate the relationship between the two, i.e., do mental health issues make people more susceptible to imposter syndrome? For instance, Alison tied her mental health diagnosis to her imposter syndrome, which affected her ability to meet deadlines, but she still managed to get excellent grades:

> And…the deadlines, for example, like… I-in the past years I discovered also that I have ADHD. So…this is also part of all the...and connected with the…imposter

> syndrome, that I'm… [Absolutely.] Yeah. Like I think, in two of the classes I just couldn't, uh… finish, within the deadline and I… gave it after and it, didn't matter at all, like my grades are…almost perfect. I was so happy about it. (Alison, 2023, Europe)

Regarding saving face, this idea focuses on participants avoiding embarrassment around making mistakes or failing at something. A core display of imposter syndrome was people's fear of disappointing themselves or others by making mistakes and that "failure" then validating that they did not deserve to be in the program. There was shame associated with being rejected, not doing something "perfectly," or taking too long to learn a task. Take the following narration from an HSS student who shared how the idea of failure was associated with verifying the belief that she did not deserve to be in graduate school:

> Because I didn't want to…I didn't want to prove that I couldn't do it? If that makes sense? [Yeah.] That fear of failure. Um, part of imposter syndrome, like if I fail, then there, [says it almost laughingly but dryly] proved it. Um, I think that made me work harder and be more, um… I wouldn't even say harder on myself, but made me focus more. Yeah. (Janet, 2023, Canada)

Thus, students constantly desired to prove their abilities and that they deserved to be graduate students, which is why any mistake was associated with failure and evidence proving their lack of competency. Goffman's idea of saving face in which individuals protect their image from embarrassment was visible in the interviews when students would only talk about things they were sure of, or if they received affirmations from the interviewer, they would elaborate further on something they were initially careful of mentioning. Participants constantly engaged in impression management, a process embedded in social interactions where individuals try to

control the impressions others have of them. The question is, what does that have to do with saving face? Naturally, the idea of failure is uncomfortable, and people want to avoid it altogether as it does not represent them in front of others in a positive light. Thus, students with imposter syndrome, who already equated mistakes to failure and were heavily concerned with their image, were also more careful in choosing their words when talking about people or places or would provide clarifications to the interviewer about the validity of their thoughts and opinions. This pattern portrayed students' desire to not "look bad" by criticizing or pointing out negative elements. When the interviewer affirmed that a situation was favourable for them, students quickly highlighted the cons, as if they were trying to give a realistic or balanced view or did not want to jinx the good things they were experiencing. This behaviour also depicts a fear of losing the good that may be potentially coming to them.

4.1.2. Caution in Narrations

Students also spoke hurriedly or showed slight discomfort and embarrassment with more pauses and hushed tones when discussing what they felt they should not talk about, particularly other people, showing another example of impression management and how they did not want to be perceived negatively. On the contrary, participants talked more easily or were more open about naming people with whom they had good relationships, hinting at the relationships and dynamics present there. When students were more careful with their words, it also indicated that they either had complications in those relationships or did not necessarily like those people or places. It seemed they feared I would perceive them saying something remotely adverse as negative or offensive. When interviewees were more comfortable naming people they had good relationships with, it seemed as if they were only wary of negative narrations getting leaked, considering nothing terrible would come from positive information travelling around.

The theme of self-presentation was consistent across all interviews, especially when students wanted to highlight something negative about a place or a person, in which case they would first say something positive and then add the negative aspects as if to diminish the effect or harshness of the criticism. Take the following example from one of the Science students:

> And I don't want to say I don't like when other people share their success, but if I'm around people who are, like, bragging too much, even though I, like, I respect their, like, ability, right, and, like, to be proud of themselves, I think that's awesome. Since I'm the opposite, it almost makes me feel like ugh [chuckles].
>
> (Holly, 2023, Canada)

When asked about whether she felt supported at university, Holly selected neutral words despite her frustration at the situation:

> Some…some faculty were very helpful and supportive. Some…it's not that they were unsupportive, it's just I would say perhaps the better word would be they were absent or… difficult to reach, which is quite frustrating, especially, I started my master's in 2021, uh, fall, so that was still kind of covid-ish. So, even harder to find people because a lot of people are still working from home or whatever. So I did have a few instances where I, like, find it difficult to, like, get in contact with people. And surprisingly, it was never my professors who were actually teaching me courses. They were always, like super responsive, super easy to get a hold of. It was usually, like, admin people, or, like, if I had a question and I wasn't sure who was the person to ask that question, figuring out who to ask the question to, was like, near impossible, which is so frustrating. (Holly, 2023, Canada)

It also alludes to the fact that people are frequently concerned with how others view them, and the idea of being seen in a negative light can be stressful and anxiety-inducing. Moreover, it also makes one wonder whether people, especially those who are part of the Canadian culture, fear criticizing things as they do not want to ruffle a few feathers or offend others. Another student chose her words carefully, using phrases like "relatively comfortable" when asked how her comfort or discomfort in university impacted her:

> Yeah, uh, I… have always been… relatively comfortable in my degree in my department. Um, It's really great. Um, one intimidating thing, of course, is [degree subject]. Historically, it's a very male-dominated, um, almost like a boys' club at

> times. Um, and even though there are a lot more women in [degree subject] now, um, there is still kind of that attitude and that feeling. (Lily, 2023, Canada)

Another female participant mentioned:

> It's, it was… um, it [almost says it laughingly] had its good things and its bad things, and I think it was… a small program. It's not necessarily one of, like, the most, like, highly considered [degree subject] programs in Ontario. Um, but there was definitely some things I really did enjoy about it but there were some things that I [says it laughingly] also didn't enjoy about it. (Brittany, 2023, Canada)

As you can see, when describing her undergraduate experience, the participant was careful not to use negative words about her previous institution and chose not to elaborate on any adverse aspects she experienced. Participants also avoided mentioning anything negative, almost like there was a fear of being seen as negative:

> Um, I, I did felt, uh, I did feel very welcomed by, um, the, the professors in my class. Um… uh, some, some were… more engaging than others. Some were… more… [Closed off?] Yeah, and, and, a bit, you know, *superior* and a bit *smug* than others that, just wanted to learn with you. Um… but I felt, but I felt, um… they… cared enough about what they were doing. Like nobody, didn't… give a shit. [Right. Yeah.] You know, nobody, uh, nobody didn't treat it with the, at least *respect*, that [degree subject] deserves. Um, so yeah, so that felt very welcoming. (Jennifer, 2023, Canada)

Thus, when describing her undergraduate experience, Jennifer was careful not to use negative words about her previous institution and chose not to elaborate on any adverse aspects she experienced. Furthermore, participants gave a balanced and neutral perspective when

discussing other people and places, highlighting both pros and cons or choosing not to elaborate on the negative elements. Male students were more likely to provide a highly neutral perspective of the university culture, their interactions with others, or their opinions about graduate life and power dynamics. Take the following narration from a male student:

> Um, no. The professors are friendly and understanding. So I never had any kind of harassments or anything that's difficult on our life. No, I didn't have any of that from any of the professors up till now. I mean, I have completed, I think, five courses and projects. So I didn't have any issues with many professors or staff. And then the general thing, you know, the fee and structure, that's something that everybody faces. Even the domestic students face it. So I'd say that's a common issue for everyone. [chuckles] Apart from that, I don't think I've faced any issue from any faculty. (Aamir, 2023, India)

The fact that participants did not want to say anything negative about people they knew or had interactions with could simply be a part of their personality, culture, or general inclination to avoid gossiping. However, the fact that they reserved comments or weighed their words carefully when describing a place, which is an abstract concept, was interesting and could mean that they do not want any negative opinions to be associated with their identities even when they had valid reasons for feeling the way they did. It also makes one wonder how the idea of critiquing and criticism is viewed in Canadian culture, considering that people approach it cautiously.

4.1.3. "Interesting" and its Connotations

Graduate students also exhibited impression management techniques through the word "interesting." While participants used this word to describe intriguing aspects, they often used it to conceal negative elements or opinions about people or places. They used it strategically, seemingly like a cover for a negative idea, to not seem rude, aggressive, or offensive. Consider the following example by one of the students from Louisiana: "Um, my supervisor…is an *interesting* guy. Um, we didn't get along super, super well" (Nina, 2023, America). She started talking about her adverse relationship with her supervisor using a neutral adjective, which shows how the word "interesting" can have negative connotations and how it is used here to conceal negative ideas, meanings, and opinions. Brittany from Canada shared the same sentiment:

> Um, but when you're kind of surrounded by people who were… you know, really great musicians and they were… very great learners and they did improve over their four years in their undergrad, but going in and kind of… not having anybody… [says it laughingly but sheepishly] to look up to, made it a little, it's a little, a little bit of an interesting dynamic. (Brittany, 2023, Canada)

This narration highlights her mixed feelings about being surrounded by average students and consequently not having the required inspiration she was seeking. Justin also chose his words carefully when speaking about the overall culture and norms within the university environment:

> Sooo, yeah, I don't... that's a difficult question because there's an *interesting* mix of things that are going on. In… some aspects, there's a lot of emphasis on, like

> uh, a professional environment, uh, and treating it like a nine, like a 9-5, and… uh, that sort of stuff. [Okay.] But in others, we realize that…we are students… Um, but we still, like, joke around and whatnot. I'm… both the… I'm both the… person that people come to when they have…issues, technical issues, things that are… that they're having trouble with, in their experiments, because, I have… a lot of experience in different things. (Justin, 2023, Canada)

Justin's narration also shows that he did not want to say something negative or give too much away, which was also indicated through the hesitation, pauses and frequent use of "um." In the discussion about power dynamics, one of the female participants from the Faculty of Science used the word "interesting" to describe the negative feelings she had about authority figures using power-grabbing tactics:

> Um, who, like, now that you're a graduate student, they don't mind you calling them their first name, like… and I don't know, it's not to judge people who want to be called Dr. so-and-so, because I do, I understand, like, you worked hard to get there, I understand you want respect, but sometimes it feels, like, overkill. [laughs] You're, you're only making me call you Dr. so-and-so. It almost feels like a power grab when, maybe, I would respect you more… if you were… more like a person to me rather than a power and authority figure. So that's always interesting to navigate. (Holly, 2023, Canada)

It seems as if the trepidation surrounding saying anything even remotely negative is inherently part of Canadian culture. Canadians are often considered very sensitive to other people's feelings, but there seemed to be a *fear* associated with saying too much or imposing anything on others. In reference to the discussion on high-context and low-context societies in

the literature, it is also worth pointing out that the context of society also influences cultural practices by reinforcing socialized activities through rituals that maintain specific core values.

4.1.4. Subtle Display of Skills

Interestingly, through their narrations, participants created a moral self for themselves, often showcasing their skills, knowledge, or something good or noteworthy they did for others. One of the participants talked about struggling with tests due to her learning disability but added that she could pick up hands-on skills and learn languages much more quickly than others. A male student used the same approach:

> Yeah, it's also sort…of the atmosphere that you said, it's sort of how, when I'm TAing, so when I'm teaching for students, or marking, I also try to portray the same atmosphere because…I can see with the first and second years, usually, sometimes a few thirds, they're usually so anxious and careful, and they're like, 'How much, how much do I add?' Uh, to being super, super careful with everything or too scared to touch…equipment or solvents and that sort of thing. So…I have found over the years, since I've been TAing for…almost a decade at this point, um… doing, doing, uh, this sort of atmosphere not only helps them, helps with their anxiety, the ones that are very bad, I also make sure that I go through and… uh, help them out, make sure that they're comfortable, that they're doing everything right. As I said, going through the reassurance and the praise, because I know that's what works with me, so, uh…that's what I…try to at least…project and help. (Justin, 2023, Canada)

As you can see, Justin also showcased his empathy for others and his years of experience when asked about initial dis/comfort in the department. This pattern was evidently seen among both men and women:

> I think it probably is a lot too, with my extraversion. I'm a people person, and I try to talk to everybody and not be judgmental, and I think that [sighs] when you give stuff out to the universe it comes back too, and I think that if I was you know shy, reserved, closed off, it would have been a different situation. Um, but I think the fact that I am a very social person and I try to help others so then that gets reciprocated so I think that that's been beneficial too. (Fiona, 2023, Canada)

Fiona attributed the reasons she received support from people to her strong interpersonal and social skills. When asked about the instances in which she felt like an imposter, one of the students explained those moments where she felt inadequate but also included her capabilities in the narration:

> My PhD, yes, will be a thesis, but it'll be very hands-on, obviously, because you've got to do it [laughs] all yourself, kind of. I'm just a hands-on person, so, but because of it, I've never, like, written a thesis, I guess. Now, I've written research papers. I have one published paper, I have others coming, so, like, I know how to write, so I'm not out of my depth in that way. (Holly, 2023, Canada)

The fact that participants' narrations frequently revealed some skill, capability, or achievement could mean that they were aware of their competence but did not want to categorically mention it, as that would make them appear overconfident and arrogant. As a result, some of them would use words like "quite good" or "fairly easy" to describe their skills and accomplishments. For instance, Brittany acknowledged her skills with a hint of embarrassment and awkwardness, using words like "fairly good" even when her confidence in her abilities was evident. In the second narration, she also chose not to mention one of her achievements and instead stated that she had a "successful start."

> I think, when I… started playing it I [says it sheepishly but also laughingly] picked it up really quickly and I was able to kind of like, like I was… fairly good at it, fairly easy, like really early on. So then, that was an encouraging factor [laughs] to continue with it because I had fun with it and I, liked how I sounded and then I just kind of, um… stuck with it… I found it took a little bit longer to be able to connect with people and make friends here than it was in my undergrad. Um, but I think like academically, like, right away I was really interested in the stuff that we were covering. Um… And I won, and I st-I, had a pretty, like I made sure that I had a pretty, like, successful start to, like, the beginning of the school year. (Brittany, 2023, Canada)

Similar to previous research (Cohen & McConnell, 2019) that exhibited the link between imposter syndrome and competitiveness of graduate school programs, the fact that students frequently showcased their skills or level of knowledge through their narrations is because, as endorsed by some of the participants, there is an expectation that being in graduate school means that individuals who have made it this far have a certain calibre of knowledge and skills. Through tangible outcomes, like a series of publications and accolades or simply demonstrating that they know their subject area, students are expected to "know enough." In their narrations, some participants also showcased noble things they had done for others. While managing impressions, women were also conscious of not praising themselves or "boasting" about their achievements, even if that included a slight mention. On the other hand, men were more comfortable with *explicitly* highlighting what they were good at. One of the male participants also revealed during the interview that he did not experience imposter syndrome despite being new to the country. It is imperative to mention that only three male students chose

to participate in the study. Thus, since the ratio of males to females was 3:17, it would not be sufficient data to conclude gender differences in students' behaviour.

Students also desired to be included and respected for their abilities when they expressed how much they did not want to disappoint anyone, a pattern consistent in previous research as well (Lim & Bowers, 1991, as cited in Haugh, 2009). Participants were constantly engaged in impression management, whether it was because they were mindful of being recorded during the interview or because they did not want to portray a negative image of themselves. It is unclear whether saving face was done only in front of the interviewer or whether they used it in their everyday interactions. What was apparent was their awareness of their abilities and skills despite feeling inadequate and unequipped to do new and different things. Like previous studies, a fear of not doing things correctly or the apprehension that comes before doing something for the first time was also mirrored in the research, as was the practice of using storytelling to communicate, interact and engage with others effectively.

Drawing on the idea of narratives and stories, imposter syndrome can also be understood through the concept of cultural repertoires and institutional ethnography. Cultural repertoires, an idea introduced by Ann Swidler, refers to the set of cultural tools or strategies individuals use to construct their actions and identities (Swidler, 1986). This framework can be applied to educational settings to understand how students from different backgrounds employ various cultural resources to navigate academic environments. Michèle Lamont's work on cultural repertoires examines how these tools vary across different social groups and influence their experiences and interactions within institutions (Lamont, 1992).

Institutional ethnography, developed by Dorothy Smith, offers a methodological approach to understanding how institutional processes and structures shape individuals'

experiences. This approach involves examining the everyday activities and interactions within institutions to reveal how power relations and organizational practices influence individual actions and identities (Smith, 1987). In the context of education, institutional ethnography can uncover how institutional policies, practices, and discourses shape students' academic trajectories and experiences of imposter syndrome. For example, as observed in my thesis, participants revealed that when they experienced microaggressions or overt discrimination by faculty members, they increasingly felt out of place despite their apparent achievements.

4.2. Internal vs. External Imposter Syndrome

4.2.1. Insecurities Perceived as Internal

This theme is about the definitions of imposter syndrome and the different ways participants felt and experienced it. I had to go out of my way to draw together the structural conversations because students insisted on seeing imposter syndrome as stemming from internal factors rather than external elements. In fact, much of the literature treats it as an individual issue, having zero connection to structural factors. It is imperative to mention that while imposter syndrome can be caused by internal factors like a perfectionist ideal and being overly critical of one's mistakes, it does not wholly and solely operate on a personal level. It is true that comparison with others, aspiring towards a perfectionist ideal, and seeing things in absolute terms does not help.

Undoubtedly, these internal orientations make individuals focus on what they lack rather than the progress they have made from when they started. However, while internal approaches are valid, external approaches and factors propagating imposter syndrome are not recognized or given enough importance, even though contextual factors make a massive difference in people's behaviour. External factors like socialization, family structures, discrimination, and cultural norms all make students feel relentlessly inadequate. As previous research has shown, imposter feelings do not exist 'in' people; rather, the dynamic between people and social contexts creates them (Murray et al., 2023). According to Tran (2023), interventions that solely focus on correcting the individual do not consider factors out of their control.

When asked about the instances in which they felt insufficient and doubted themselves more, most interviewees attributed it to something *they* did rather than a structural or external cause, as shown in past literature (Perez, 2020). Some of them categorically stated that the

pressure not to disappoint or fail was not inflicted by their parents or faculty members but rather by themselves. Many participants only mentioned a structural cause of their imposter syndrome when categorically asked about external factors influencing their self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy. The idea that structural factors are routinely left out of the discussion on imposter syndrome also depicts the neoliberal thinking that people are solely to blame for feeling inadequate, and they need to pull themselves up by their bootstraps to change the way they feel.

Thus, it was evident that participants found it relatively more challenging to attribute imposter syndrome to anything in their environment, as they kept returning to how *they* felt it. This pattern displays the neoliberal era, where individuals are *expected* to be responsible for *everything* they feel, as if they bring it upon themselves. They have trouble breaking from this type of neoliberal thinking, and it is hard for them to imagine that structural barriers can impact them more profoundly. The pattern that people could only view imposter syndrome as caused by internal factors is a structural barrier to addressing structural barriers. It also shows the ferocity of this approach, which makes individuals feel that everything is internal even though they are systemic. Take the following example showing insistence about imposter syndrome being internal:

> God, no. I was freaking terrified. Um… it's not that anybody necessarily did anything to make me feel uncomfortable? It's just that like, there was such an immense amount of pressure coming in, and like… like having…and like being… [sighs] Because, like, like…working in a [degree subject name] lab is very different than like, taking, like, a-a-a course in a lab. Like, the amount of stuff you're expected to be able to do on your *own* is intimidating. The, just like, the level of, like, work that was, like, required of me was very overwhelming at first.

> And so I think early on I was just like freaking scared. [laughs] And I was like crying a lot before I came in and it ended up being fine after. But I was definitely… I-I definitely did not come in feeling, like… great. Like I was, like, sick to my stomach nervous. (Pamela, 2023, Canada)

Thus, Pamela attributed her initial dread in the department to the nature of her subject being intimidating rather than people making her feel inadequate. Much like Chapman's (2017) research on academic writing and imposter syndrome, Becky explained that the editing revision process of her thesis made her feel inadequate because the constant back and forth gave the impression that her efforts were not enough:

> But being like, 'Okay, this is it. it's finally done.' And then it's like, 'No, it's not. No it's not.' Like, 'You know what, why am I doing this? It's freaking stupid. I'm not gonna get a job for 25 years, I have no money and no prospects, [laughs] and I just don't have anything. I wanna leave the academy.' And it was actually enough to push me to be like, maybe this isn't it for me. Right? Maybe the grind is too long. Um, the truth is, I know that I'm good at…and I-I…or maybe more so that I'm built best for something that's a little bit less... like 9…I can't do 9-5, that would kill me. So that's, like, a little less tangible that you can play with thoughts and creative knowledge. (Becky, 2023, Canada)

Interviewees often mentioned the fear of failure, mistakes, being judged, and disappointing others, acknowledging that the pressure to consistently "succeed" was more self-imposed than inflicted by anyone else:

> Yeah, they're not, like, going to say that, but they brought me into this world. I have to prove that I, like, they did a pretty good thing. [laughs nervously] Um, so

> even though they're not going to say like, 'No, you didn't, like, do that.' So there's still like, that pressure that I guess I bring on myself? But when you're the first person in your family to do something, you want to prove that… you're doing it… well. So, like you want to prove that like… I guess like your worth, that all that hard work and all the stuff that your parents put into doing that, so. (Cindy, 2023, Canada)

Many participants did not attribute their imposter syndrome to anything external unless categorically asked about external factors. Jennifer was no exception to this rule:

> Because there are so often times where… I have no idea what I'm doing. I have *no* idea what I'm doing, let alone… what is to come from the thing that I'm doing now. So that is something that… clouds a lot of… what I do. And I do wonder if it leads to that, the introversion and the anxiety and shyness that I was talking about. Chicken and egg. What comes first? Imposter syndrome or… anxiety, or social anxiety? [laughs] You know, like which one is which? Because I... To go back to like the wandering over to see, who am I? What the hell am I *doing* here to have, who am *I* to walk over and say, 'Oh, yes, you have anything interesting over here for me?' Who am *I*?' (Jennifer, 2023, Canada)

Interestingly, Jennifer first mentioned that she experienced imposter syndrome in ways related to her anxiety and introversion. However, when I explicitly asked her about external factors, she linked her imposter syndrome to her first presentation at a conference. Janet mentioned that seeing her mistakes as failures kept her from many things and made her doubt herself. However, she did not attribute it to anything external until the interviewer asked her

specifically about any external factors causing imposter syndrome. Even then, she insisted that internal factors, such as her learning disability, caused it:

> And [says it laughingly] I actually found out, since I've been here at MUN, um, I have a, uh, learning disability that I, my mom told me after, like 'Oh yeah, you always, you could, you would know a lot of things but when it came time to write it on a test, you, it was like you knew nothing.' Like, and it was like that, I discovered that here too but I discovered it on my own. I just thought I was, a bad… student right grade school in high school. And that's partly why I never… thought… of going to university when I was fresh out of high school because I didn't feel that my grades were good enough… So, I think, it's getting back to your question. I think it's all those, my, what I feel were failures. Um, that's what holds me back or makes me feel like this imposter syndrome. But this, it's internal. (Janet, 2023, Canada)

Janet also showed discomfort when she mentioned how her disability held her back, as evidenced by the "um." Similarly, Cindy highlighted that a high school teacher who categorically told her that she would not be able to succeed, coupled with being a first-generation student, made her feel inadequate and propelled her to want to prove her capabilities:

> I think because… in high school I once had a teacher tell me that I would never achieve anything and that kind of just like… pulled through my entire… undergrad and like mast… like current masters even though I'm only in first semester just like trying to figure it out and like proving, wanting to prove that I am able… to… get there? Um, I'm also the first person in my family to go to grad school. Um, my mom was the first person in her family to go to college.

> My dad was the first in his family to go to university. Um, so it's like a family of firsts. [Nice!] And I just… even though my parents are like, 'You don't need to like prove anything to us. You're not gonna disappoint us.' I'm still like '*No.* I will disappoint you if [knocks on table four times] I don't do this perfectly.' (Cindy, 2023, Canada)

Thus, similar to previous research, being the first to do something heightens people's imposter syndrome. For instance, in a predominantly white space where whites were also hostile towards people of colour, the latter had to ask themselves what privileges and rewards were more important to them over their personal and professional freedom. Storlie et al. (2016) showed that this tension for many people of colour emerges from being the first to do something, like being first-generation, racial, Indigenous, or any other minority group in a place where people like them have never been present. Furthermore, students from minority groups who feel undeserving and exceedingly grateful to be admitted into the program are less likely to resist the system that is now making them overwork and burn themselves out (Tran, 2023).

Many participants talked about how some setback or mistake triggered imposter syndrome for them, and positive outcomes or achievements would only temporarily alleviate those imposter feelings:

> It, it can be... it's…kind of both, where… it'll be something that currently happens that, uh, will trigger the memory, potentially the memory cascade sequence unless I… spend a lot of effort to suppress it and that's very taxing. Um, but even now at every... If I do not *constantly* [knocks on table for emphasis] remind myself that my colleagues *do not* hate me, I will start spiralling. Because I am... because all that it takes is like a, being brushed off by mistake or um… or I'm talking and

> then talked over, because... I don't know if you'd call it bad habit, the best way to shut me up is just talk. That will instantly stop me. So, all that it takes is something like that, and then just the little thing at the back of your mind saying, 'Hey! They hate you.' (Justin, 2023, Canada)

Thus, Justin stated how any past mistake on his part or an interaction that he interpreted as going awry would be enough to make him feel inadequate. It is no secret that imposter syndrome tends to be more intense and frequent when people attempt something for the first time. Lack of experience and the uncertainty of trying something new and living up to people's expectations naturally create doubt and apprehension. However, male participants considered this temporary anxiety and stress as imposter syndrome, even though the latter is a pervasive feeling that does not go away even when people achieve external success. Furthermore, people with imposter syndrome feared the possibility that they would be exposed for being frauds. Raj from India stated the following:

> So I would say probably one of the more recent imposter syndrome was I… was preparing for my comprehensive exam, and, as I was sitting there, right, trying to write it, I'm thinking… uh, like, 'They're going to see through that. I, I am not, I don't actually know what this is, as firm as, uh, I'm supposed to.' […] Um, and then during the… actual examination process when they were asking questions, of course you're panicking, so your mind blanks about something but then… I thought, 'What if they know that...What if, what if it's not that I'm just panicking? What if it's, I don't actually know this?' Um… So, I would say, like, that was one instance of imposter syndrome. I'm just feeling like, I wasn't able, like... I'm writing this report, I'm doing this presentation but like, 'What if they just… know

> that… I'm like, it was like… done within, a couple of weeks as opposed to, years of study?' (Raj, 2023, India)

A crucial part of self-doubt and feeling inadequate was overestimating other people's capabilities and underestimating their own. Interviewees often used the phrase "fake it till you make it" to explain how they dealt with feelings of inadequacy and the apprehension or stress they felt in their graduate life. Janet voiced the same, stating how displaying a confident, composed self was a routine strategy for her.

> That helped me fake it till I made it. Like that helped me, like I could, be… it's really weird because you're like two people. Right? Like, you're split because you're…on the outside. Like only, only I know *what* I had to do to get to this point. And it's the person beside me, has that in them too. Only *they* know. But I'm sitting here thinking… 'You probably have 4.0 and that's how you got here, you know, and here I am scrambling to get those last few marks, to make sure,' you know? [Yeah.] So there's always that. And then when you get talking, they're like, somebody will say, 'Oh, I was really bad at math. I get like,' [hits table] [inaudible] And you get that. (Janet, 2023, Canada)

Students with imposter syndrome also expected situations to go much worse than they actually did, and many were distrustful of people's feedback, irrespective of whether it was a professor, friend, colleague, or family member. While distrust was a common issue among students with imposter syndrome, the fact that they found it difficult to trust their peers and colleagues' feedback also makes one wonder whether that stems from the competitive nature of graduate studies. Take the following narration from one of the HSS students:

> Like, I am a good speaker because I have years of experience and like, this is just the neutral zone for me but like, for someone who doesn't, they're like, 'Wow that's really good.' And then, like, I don't take your compliments seriously, basically. I don't know what that, like, translates to. But, um, yeah. So it's kind of just like, this internal dialogue of saying you know, like 'they're recognizing something that like, they find valuable in you' and like, it *is* a compliment. And, I think like, for me it's, it's like… the relationship that we have is maybe not strong enough that I feel like I believe the compliments? But maybe I should? I don't know [laughs]. (Susan, 2023, Canada)

Thus, Susan's narration indicated that she found it difficult to trust people's compliments, especially if they did not know much about her. A female student despairingly admitted the same:

> Um… They always try to…cheer me up and like, 'No, you're capable, no, you're amazing, look at everything that you've done until now. You've done all of this.' Uh, sometimes it's difficult to…also…recognize and to even, hear them saying it, like it sounds like a lie. [Yeah, definitely.] Yeah. like I can't recognize everything, like all of that, that they say. Uh, sometimes it's, yeah, I've been like, Okay, yeah, I-I'm here, I'm doing all of that.' But… even then… I don't know. (Alison, 2023, Europe)

Thus, like other participants, Alison also expressed that even though she turned to her friends and partner for support, she still had difficulty believing their compliments despite their sincerity.

4.2.2. The end of imposter syndrome?

Participants unanimously agreed on the relentless nature of imposter syndrome and how reassurances, affirmations, and even achievements only helped to deal with it temporarily. The knowledge that other people also experience imposter syndrome was helpful for some participants but not others. Hence, even when students "trauma-bonded" and leaned on each other, knowing they all felt inadequate and like they did not deserve to have "a seat on the table," it did not help to do away with their imposter syndrome.

The longevity and permanence of imposter syndrome is a cause for concern for gatekeepers, including university administration and professors, because they are responsible for the culture and norms that breed positive and negative outcomes. Any type of validation only helped temporarily to drown out the imposter feeling, but nothing practically eliminated it:

> Yeah! It never freaking goes away. [chuckles] You r-really think it will this time. Because, like…It's like, you have a really good success in the lab where you kind of understand something, and you're like, 'Oh, finally I've earned my place,' and then you mess something up, and you're back to square one. (Pamela, 2023, Canada)

In fact, for some participants, it was not enough for others to be sharing the same imposter syndrome experience:

> But… I don't know, it's just so complicated. And it's not like it goes away simply because somebody says that, 'Oh, yeah, I feel this way too.' I mean, it's still there. I mean, and I think, especially in a situation where you're doing something new, um, you tend to feel even more like 'I'm probably going to mess it up or

> something.' Right? Yeah. And you're always in that little bit of… fear and you just put on this… fake smile and hope that nobody notices that you're dying inside. (Janet, 2023, Canada)

Thus, Janet's imposter feelings and thoughts did not go away completely, even if she knew others felt the same. The helplessness that people felt at not being able to eliminate these negative thoughts was expressed by many participants:

> When I was doing it, I think, yes, I feel better and I'm much more steady in my academy or my life, but sometimes, because things kept happening, and maybe something triggered me into that feeling and, I suddenly cannot think that way, the right way, you know, just, um… And I need time… I always need time to calm myself down. Maybe in that time I just stop doing anything in maybe competition or… something I don't like and I just stop everything and I choose to, maybe watch a movie, TV show or… Netflix, Disney or anything, just empty my mind. (Mandy, 2023, China)

Thus, Mandy revealed that distracting herself from her negative thoughts would only help to a certain extent. Tamara from Central America also said she would tell herself to act confident and use affirmations and therapy:

> Like I do try to like, uh, therapy. I do try to remind myself you know, you, you're like 'You're worth it, you're doing the work, you're perfectly capable like, if you don't trust yourself, at least trust the department that they worked to bring you in, if you weren't good enough,' Like I do, it is a process of sitting down and trying to remind yourself, always. It *doesn't* work! but… [laughs] [But you still do it,

> right?] But I do it. In the end, I do truly believe when you fake it, nobody's going to know, everything is fine. (Tamara, 2023, Central America)

Still, she simultaneously acknowledged that none of these tactics worked to do away with her imposter syndrome. More than one participant mentioned how people recognize that imposter syndrome is a prevalent issue, especially among graduate students. However, it is still in a preliminary stage where it is acknowledged but not addressed effectively. This can also spark future research to gauge whether people experiencing imposter syndrome can permanently eliminate the self-doubting, perfectionist mindset.

More than one person mentioned that the more they learned about their field, picked up new skills, or became more comfortable in their department, their imposter syndrome became less intense. However, it did not go away entirely because the moment participants entered a new and unfamiliar situation or were expected to do something they had not done before, such as speaking at a conference or partaking in a new class discussion, they felt inadequate and unfit to be in that setting:

> Like, it's, it's super hard. So like, after that, for a while, I couldn't do anything at all. I was feeling like the most stupid person on earth, to not, uh…And when I asked them about it, they just like, they sent me the link with all the blah, blah, blah that oh I had, I'm supposed to know that. (Alison, 2023, Europe)

Alison talked about how she had a breakdown because the administration did not explain how the system worked. While feeling apprehensive before doing something new is natural, imposter syndrome is more than just feeling nervous because it does not go away even when people continue to achieve successful outcomes.

4.2.3. The medicalization of imposter syndrome

Sometimes, participants talked about imposter syndrome as a state or an affliction rather than a feeling, acknowledging the irrational nature of their thoughts and feelings despite other people validating their success through praise or having tangible achievements to prove their competence and success. Take the following narration where the student talks about imposter syndrome as a state or an affliction:

> But it felt like I had something to bring because I spoke up, so yeah the two lessons I think I've learned are like if I do feel like I've had an imposter syndrome…to like stop and self-reflect and be like 'Okay, like, what do I know?' Like I'm not stupid. [voice almost breaks] Um, so to kind of doing that, of taking a breath and speaking up and just parts, just helps me feel less inadequate, I guess. (Nina, 2023, America)

However, the fact that some students viewed and identified imposter syndrome as a medical diagnosis as an illness could also be because I used the terminology "imposter syndrome" rather than "imposter phenomenon" or "infiltrator experience" (Tran, 2023). This kind of wording additionally highlights how people do not want to be viewed as sick or having a disease. Another potential reason people tend to view imposter syndrome as a medical state is because of how it was approached in 1978 when coined by clinicians Clance & Imes. This is because the word "syndrome" usually refers to an event as a mental illness or cognitive distortion, which makes it a personality flaw and not an event that people experience (Tran, 2023). When talking about self-doubting thoughts, Jasmine admitted that she would try to silence them:

> And I do feel like, there are times when I feel like, 'Hey, what I'm doing here, I shouldn't be here. I should be at home with my children and my family, not to…study…in school.' But that doesn't, like I try to, like I say, I try to... [Think objectively?] Yeah, exactly. To try to… quiet the imposter voice, in my head [laughs]. (Jasmine, 2023, Europe)

Jasmine's narration clearly indicates her embarrassment about the nature of those thoughts. Similarly, Janet also acknowledged the irrational nature of those self-doubting thoughts:

> And like I said too, like I really feel like when you're sitting in a room and you have all these brilliant ideas coming all the time and you're thinking, 'How do you think of these things? How are you so smart?' And you don't even think that, 'Wait a minute, I'm one of these people at the table too. So I must… be meant to be here.' But I never feel like that! I feel like I'm in the wrong place, like… an alien, that guy with the hook. (Janet, 2023, Canada)

Her narration also indicated something that many other participants did, which was to overestimate others and underestimate themselves. One of the interviewees talked about imposter syndrome as if it were an illness that required some form of treatment or cure:

> It's good in, in, the, normal, thoughts or maybe a good grade from professor? And something… can be seen as an… achievement. Yeah, I think achievement can… But I think it… reminds me that, what kind of thing will, will… awaken, will weaken my feeling of this syndrome, like competition. (Mandy, 2023, China)

It is, however, unclear whether she spoke about it as an illness due to a language barrier or she considered it as such. Some participants referred to imposter syndrome as a medical term,

possibly because early descriptions of the phenomenon approached it as a clinical state (Clance & Imes, 1978). The context in which imposter syndrome was coined was around the experiences of women entering male-dominated workplaces, which did not account for structural factors like patriarchy and discrimination against women. Multiple renamed versions of the imposter syndrome were made, from the "imposter phenomenon" to "perceived fraudulence" to "impostorism." However, the commonality in these iterations was that the person's reality was inaccurate due to circumstances, cognitive distortion, or personality disorders; hence, scholars did not consider external realities. Thus, even when individuals worked on personal change, the oppressive setting did not change, with only achievements proving that people's self-doubting beliefs were wrong (Tran, 2023).

4.2.4. Simultaneous Presence of Self-Confidence & Self-Doubt

Interestingly, all the participants were aware of their skills and capabilities, often mentioning that they knew they could actually accomplish those required tasks. However, that confidence and self-awareness did not stop them from feeling inadequate when they struggled, for example, while understanding different readings, conducting experiments, submitting a grant application, or thinking of something intelligent to add to the class discussion. One would assume that people with imposter syndrome do not have confidence in themselves, given they doubt their capabilities. However, this study did not display this notion; instead, it was quite the opposite because self-doubt and confidence existed simultaneously.

If self-confidence (or sometimes even overconfidence) and self-doubt can coexist in a person, at what point does the former develop into the latter or vice versa? The people looking for validation, to be liked and wanted, were simultaneously not short on confidence. Furthermore, there was a desire to ensure others did not perceive them as arrogant by talking "too much" about their achievements and skills. For example, one of the male students stated, "Imposter syndrome negates the arrogance, and the arrogance negates the imposter syndrome, but I can't settle in the middle" (Justin, 2023, Canada).

As a result, they often felt that they also had to work hard at "keeping up appearances" – a phrase frequently used by interviewees to highlight how they had to pretend that they knew how to do everything required in their graduate life. This point is essential to mention as participants constantly expressed how knowing more people in the department or university and more about the field equates to being more learned, successful, and an expert in their area of study. One student expressed the same:

> So, I think, like, the best thing for my imposter syndrome, this sounds really bad but like, the best thing for my imposter syndrome is, like, to remind myself that other people don't…*do* what I *do*? And like talk to people who have no idea like what's going on? And, like, I called my mom the other week, and my brother was on the phone too, and he was like, 'So what have you been doing?' I told him a little about my, my project and he's like, 'Oh I know three of those words.'
>
> (Pamela, 2023, Canada)

Thus, for Pamela, what helped with her imposter syndrome was knowing that what she knew and did was actually challenging and exciting for people. Participants also exhibited Haas & Shaffir's (1977) "cloak of competence," in which they expressed their desire to learn everything or act like they have to avoid feeling inadequate. This sentiment also alludes to a dominant concern about image and reputation, where students with imposter syndrome were apprehensive about being perceived as failures, incompetent, and undeserving of their current positions. The idea that knowledge is power, which defines students' success in their graduate lives, needs to be explored to understand where it stems from, as it alludes to the prevalence of imposter syndrome among university students and even people in the workplace.

One of the participants also showed this aspiration when she was embarrassed to admit that she did not know the answer to one of the interview questions, and another was conscious about admitting at a conference that he did not know "everything." It also shows the fear of openly acknowledging that they do not have answers to everything. Some participants also used department-specific jargon to showcase their knowledge, feeling powerful when they received a positive response of awe and admiration. Thus, it is worth exploring that gatekeeper culture

could be to blame for propagating this culture where people are treated negatively for not having "enough" knowledge or a particular background.

Furthermore, participants had very black-and-white philosophies about how, if they made a mistake, it meant they did not know "anything" and, thus, saw it as a colossal issue. The way that mistakes would weigh on participants' minds also begs the question of where this idea of perfection and the pressure not to make mistakes stem from if they are so prevalent amongst students from different backgrounds and experiences. This pattern also suggests that struggling to become proficient in something is seen as being bad at that task, and the faster they find solutions, the smarter or more successful they are. Aside from the tendency to equate mistakes to failure, participants used absolute terms when talking about themselves and others. They often overestimated other people's work and capabilities and underestimated their own, claiming they were "doing nothing" and did not know "anything."

Another pattern prevalent across interviews was that participants acknowledged that they were doing well regarding their research or exposure to opportunities. But whenever the interviewer affirmed that the situation was indeed positive, they were quick to counteract with some negative aspects, as if clarifying that the problem was still stressful was imperative. Consider the following narration from Holly:

> So, it's great going in because they're so under-researched, not much is known about them. So, I am kind of like have a bit of free form in what I do because not much is known. So, nothing I do is like…incorrect in a broad sense because nothing's known, so you just gotta start from somewhere. I'm basically starting from my own foundational work that I did on a survey. [Wow. That's so good though.] Um, but it's also hard, of course, because then when I'm trying to find

references or support, support my…you know, my thinking, it's almost impossible. (Holly, 2023, Canada)

This coexistence of self-confidence and self-doubt was seen in different ways across interviews:

So, now I'm kind of, uh, with this degree program especially, I'm setting myself up to hopefully one day play in an orchestra, like an orchestral setting, [Nice!] Um, but… those jobs are few and far between in Canada, so. (Brittany, 2023, Canada)

In this case, Brittany was quick to mention that there was a low possibility of her getting recognized for her talents, especially after I affirmed how inspiring her ambitions were. Interestingly, participants would offer these kinds of clarifications and rationalizations for their actions as if their internal dialogue was harsh enough. Hence, they would provide a balanced opinion to drown out those relentlessly negative thoughts. Students were also harder on themselves but were kinder to others, as eloquently put by one of the participants, "We are very good at bringing others up but pushing ourselves down. Because we can't get the validation internally, so we're looking for it externally." (Justin, 2023, Canada)

Participants frequently shared their concerns about their image in other people's eyes and how those tend to contribute to feelings of inadequacy. Some highlighted how others expected them to do well all the time, and if they made any mistake, it would validate their feelings of self-inadequacy. A couple of participants even made it evident that they had more faith in their academic capabilities than their ability to be social, liked, and wanted by others:

But even just their [friends]… general presence is…comforting, it's reassuring, it's a reminder that… it's a reminder that… I, I actually do have the capability of

> making friends. Because the… not only does it relate to academically, I'm also just like, 'I'm a disgusting piece of shit. Who the hell wants to hang out with me? Who, who would even wanna be around me?' So… I, I need to… reign that in. […] It…affects me in my, um, in my, with relationships, with people, so… I'm constantly doubting. As I alluded to earlier, I'm constantly… having to remind myself that my colleagues *don't hate me*. Um… I'm.. When it comes to… uh, dating and that sort of thing, trying to meet people… I… have a very hard time, uh, reminding myself that… there are people that… are interested in me because I look at myself in a mirror and just like... [pauses] 'Well, eh… put the bag on.' (Justin, 2023, Canada)

One of the students also indicated through her accounts that she aspired to have a thriving romantic relationship and would compare herself to people who had the same. Calling it "invisible competition," she expressed feeling inadequate and stressed when she compared herself to others on social yardsticks. Some students implicitly shared the importance of a thriving romantic relationship:

> And sometimes you have to understand that the way that they… Like, the power dynamics work or somebody that might be looking down on you, it's more of a reflection on them. And it did take me a really, really long time to realize that and lots of self-blame and lots of, you know, wondering why I'm not good enough. And this more came from relationship stuff because I have been more successful in academia than I have in my romantic life. (Fiona, 2023, Canada).

Thus, even while discussing unrelated topics like negative power dynamics and how to deal with them, Fiona conveyed her aspiration to have a thriving romantic relationship and the difference she had noted in her academic vs. social capabilities.

Students across ethnicities, genders, cultures, and backgrounds felt like they were not smart enough or deserving enough to be in their graduate programs, which makes one wonder what kinds of structural factors cause people from different walks of life to feel inadequate, irrespective of whether they are more acquainted with the system, like Canadian students, or less aware, like international students. Drawing on the ‘knowledge is power’ concept, sociologists have discussed ideas of status and cultural capital within education, as they are pivotal in understanding educational outcomes and the reproduction of social inequalities. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital suggests that individuals possess varying degrees of non-financial social assets, such as education, intellect, style of speech, dress, or physical appearance, which can help them achieve upward social mobility (Bourdieu, 1986). In the educational context, cultural capital can be manifested through familiarity with the dominant culture's codes, knowledge, and educational practices, thereby influencing students' academic success.

Annette Lareau's research further explores how cultural capital functions within educational settings. She identifies that middle-class families tend to engage in "concerted cultivation," actively developing their children's talents and skills through structured activities, which align closely with the values and expectations of educational institutions. Conversely, working-class and poor families often practice "accomplishment of natural growth," allowing children more autonomy but providing less direct engagement with institutionalized forms of

cultural capital (Lareau, 2003). These differing approaches can lead to disparities in how children navigate educational systems and are perceived by educators.

4.2.5. Dealing with imposter syndrome

Irrespective of whether they felt better when their peers or faculty experienced imposter syndrome, participants acknowledged that most students in a classroom felt inadequate and compared themselves to others from the beginning. This collective feeling indicates the indiscriminate nature of imposter syndrome, where people with all kinds of qualifications, achievements, experiences, and backgrounds feel relentlessly inadequate and hence, makes the following question even more relevant and vital: Which parts of academia make students feel undeserving that renders tangible achievements useless in eliminating these feelings? Participants' narrations also showed that these strategies only helped to deal with imposter syndrome temporarily, which validates my argument that structural and external factors are involved which are unaddressed and require resolution.

Most strategies revolved around improving their thinking and attitudes. Some students said that they would watch something relevant to their field to affirm that they understand the subject matter and deserve to be in the position that they are in. Take the following narration from one of the students:

> One of them is again similar, is like I'll go…[chuckles nervously] This is like really weird but like I'll go like watch some, like, uh, [department subject]… like, tutorial videos on YouTube? For like people in like, first or second year [department subject] and they'll like go over stuff and they'll review it and I'll be like, 'Okay, I knew that, I knew that, I knew that.' And that will like remind me that I've learned and retained things and then also I'll scroll down to the comments and a bunch of people will be like, 'Oh my god, I watched your whole video and I still don't understand' or 'Thank you for finally explaining this, now I finally

> begin to wrap my head around it' or you know, 'I understood the first half but I'm going to need to watch the second half again' and like reminding myself that you know, the stuff that I do is stuff that other people struggle with or that other people have to work to do. (Pamela, 2023, Canada)

While students highlighted varying ways of dealing with imposter syndrome, they all agreed that these were just temporary solutions:

> "So, sometimes like you have to be your own cheerleader and like you have to, you know, [clears throat] like catch yourself in those negative thought patterns and like I've had to go through years of therapy and years of self-discovery of understanding my own mental illnesses and understanding, you know, like I suffer with intrusive thoughts, repetitive, intrusive thoughts […] So, when these things pop into my head and instead of, you know, latching onto it and just spiraling with it […] I have to shake my head and I'm like, 'No, I can do this. Like, I wouldn't have made it this far, you know, if I wasn't who I am.' (Fiona, 2023, Canada)

Thus, Fiona brought up how she used affirmations to deal with negative thoughts that are primarily caused by internal factors. A common theme was that students in romantic relationships first turned to their partners, who would remind them of their achievements through tangible outcomes, validating their feelings, or simply listening to them when they "vented." What helped more was if their partners or friends were not studying or part of academia, which would give them an objective perspective. A female participant expressed the following about her boyfriend:

> So, it's nice because he has like a non-academic perspective which is like valuable I think. Um, and of course he cares about me, so he builds me up and gives me confidence. But he's a very logical person, um, so I know he won't just lie to me, like to, like, to make me feel better. Like, he helps me, like, break things down logically and that's just the type of person I am. I'm also, like, a logical, like, analytical person. Um, so if I'm like, I'm feeling bad about this, I feel bad about this, like, he'll help me break it down, think about it more. Which is nice because he has that different, like, life perspective of not being in school. (Holly, 2023, Canada)

Thus, her partner's non-academic outlook helped Holly deal with imposter syndrome. Lana endorsed the same viewpoint:

> I think… reiterating, things that have happened in the past, so when you're with somebody for a long time, um, that's one of the benefits, I guess. 'Look at when this happened that time and t-this turned out well. Look at when this happened.' He… also reminds me… of all the good… things? All that good energy that you're putting out there. Why that's important, why it's important to… just… there's two choices in life, right? You can stay in a situation that you don't like and you can make it better or you can leave that situation. And he reminds me that I need to make… those choices. (Lana, 2023, America)

As you can see, Lana also dealt with imposter syndrome by talking to her husband, who would remind her of the good things she had done or achieved. She turned to her husband for support because he had witnessed her journey from the beginning.

> And so, um, talking to her about my research sometimes and about what I'm doing can sometimes make me feel a bit better because she's like 'Oh like this sounds really cool, it sounds like you're doing a cool job.' Because she's from a total outside perspective. […] She's just a friend of mine who is vaguely familiar with academia. Um, so that can be really helpful to talk to somebody from just completely outside of my circle. (Lily, 2023, Canada)

Lily's remarks also indicated how talking to one of her friends helped her because she provided an impartial and unbiased perspective that was removed from academia. Interestingly, while students did look for an objective viewpoint to validate their skills, the distrust associated with people's feedback did not completely go away. Furthermore, getting good grades, praise, constructive but clear feedback, securing funding, focusing on one's own achievements, and the idea of successfully finishing their degree helped them feel competent and decreased self-doubt. Additionally, participants frequently mentioned that when they would train or teach others and hear themselves demonstrating knowledge of the subject, that would effectively affirm that they do deserve to be in the position they are in:

> Um.. just that I… *do* have the capabilities.. to do things… uh, to do things even though I doubt myself. Um… for instance… I can…just arbitrarily, like, sitting here or doing, um, whatnot, working on work, it's just like, 'I don't know anything.' But then somebody comes and asks me a question, and it's straight to autopilot of 'Here's the exact answer that you're looking for, here's the exact, um, different ideas.' […] Um… so…just the reminder that…I do have, 'I do have the skills…that…I…that I advertise, that I have spent *literally* a decade learning and honing.' (Justin, 2023, Canada)

This was endorsed by multiple participants:

> Now that we have a larger lab, other people can help, help each other with other stuff, but, sometimes one of them, like, comes up and says, 'But like, I want *your* help.' It's, uh… [It's definitely a validation.] It can be a validation […] One of my, one of the lab members, and she said, 'Yeah, I can ask the others, but like, I want *you* to help me do,' then... Yeah. It feels validating. (Raj, 2023, India)

Evidently, teaching others helped him challenge or overcome imposter syndrome. Another student expressed, with some embarrassment, that younger students coming to her for assistance helped overcome imposter syndrome, albeit temporarily:

> And then, I mean, it sounds bad, [says it sheepishly] but then having these younger students who haven't had anyone support or like, um, direction. And me being like, 'Okay, here's what you're going to need to do.' Um, so being able…to be in that position gives a lot of validation? (Nina, 2023, America)

Some participants felt better verbalizing their self-doubting thoughts with their friends or colleagues who also experienced imposter syndrome. However, others mentioned that this exercise did not prove effective as it seemed like an echo chamber with no resolution:

> Um, so that can be really helpful to talk to somebody from just completely outside of my circle. […] they're much more objective. So, it can be hard, obviously, when you talk to somebody who's feeling the same thing as you, you might get into a bit of an echo chamber where you're like, 'Yeah, I don't feel like I'm good enough.' 'No, I don't feel like I'm good enough either.' Okay, obviously neither of us are good enough. As opposed to, you know, you talk to someone totally outside, 'I don't feel like I'm good enough.' 'Oh, well, why not? It seems like

> you've, you know, you do this, this, this and this' and that can be really good to hear. (Lily, 2023, Canada)

In fact, Susan explicitly mentioned that professors sharing their experiences of imposter syndrome made her feel even more anxious and stressed.

> Because they're like so… they're drowning so much in their work they don't have time to like build relationships with us. Um, and then they're also like… you know, unloading *their* feelings of imposter syndrome and burnout and everything and that's like, I think it's like a way for them to like… or maybe they think that it's a way to connect? But like for me, it's just like… a *huge*, like, red flag, May Day, May Day, like, panic mode from everyone [laughs nervously]. (Susan, 2023, Canada)

However, other interviewees felt reassured when this happened because they could relate to their peers and professors more, and this exercise would effectively humanize faculty members:

> Yeah, so…yeah, learning that like other people suffer from imposter syndrome and like other people who even like I think are like extremely intelligent and extremely talented finding out that they suffer from it as well? Um, has been like really helpful and eye-opening because you know, it kind of… I kind of remind myself it, Like…this is the same thing other people might think about you. They might look at me and be like, 'How does she have imposter syndrome?' (Pamela, 2023, Canada)

Only one student mentioned that the reason she would not go to her classmates about feeling inadequate was because if they did not feel like she did, that would make her feel even worse and would become counterproductive:

> Um, but my other classmates, I probably wouldn't because I just don't think it's, like, talked about. I don't know. 'Cause when you start saying, you, like, start comparing each other and you don't want to go to someone who's your direct classmate to say like I think I'm doing poorly because… what if they're *not* doing poorly and then you just feel even worse and you compare each other. […] I need it to be someone who's, like, removed from it. 'Cause if not, I think I'll probably just start comparing myself to them even more [laughs]. (Holly, 2023, Canada)

More than one participant commented on using therapy to deal with imposter thoughts and feelings, "Um, definitely my counsellor. Um, he has helped me a lot with some cognitive behavioural therapies to change my negative thinking styles. Um, and I also… he's really helped remind me that sometimes it's like a fallacy" (Fiona, 2023, Canada). Mandy also spoke about using therapy to battle negative self-doubting thoughts, concluding that it was not a long-term solution that would make her imposter feelings go away:

> I think it's more psychology consulting because, because of my bad childhood I was taking, I think it's more than two years, uh, psychology therapy, or we could say consulting in my undergraduate period, and I think they helped me a lot. Like, the, the therapy instructor, and she's so nice and she has a solid professional background, um, psychology and she… taught me how to deal with those pressures or this bad feelings that I'm not good enough. And she also lead me

how to think if I… feel that way. And it is… um, a good way for me to challenge those syndrome. (Mandy, 2023, China)

Students who had experienced informal settings with faculty and peers spoke in favour of such interventions, stating that not only did those events help make friends in the department, but they also humanized faculty members and made them less authoritative and more approachable. Participants preferred informal settings as those spaces made them feel welcomed and improved the department culture with the pressure off.

A consistent tactic to deal with imposter syndrome was self-deprecating humour, in which case participants would laugh and joke about stressful possibilities, using it as a coping mechanism. Consider this example from Justin:

Uh, everything has been actually, very, very well. I have a lot of colleagues that are very supportive. A lot of them are very similar to me, to, um… Like…from, for our degrees, we're all PhD students. Uh, at the halfway mark of our degree, we have a… known as a comprehensive exam. Uh, Pass-fail. If you fail, you're just expelled. […] So… so, leading up to it, the joke was always uh, 'Oh! It's good to be here. Too bad I'll be gone in a few weeks.' (Justin, 2023, Canada)

One of the HSS students stated:

So, I felt very comfortable because I knew my professors that I was having. So, I felt very comfortable, um, and I trust they'll take good care of us. They're not going to lead us astray, like, that way. But like I said, I didn't feel 100%... Fake it till you make it. I use humour a lot, um, to get, like, to ease, ease in. So that was like the same thing, like the guy with the hook is going to come get me. And then

everybody had that aha moment, like we all…are in the same boat. (Janet, 2023, Canada)

Thus, Janet categorically mentioned that she indulged in jokes to ease into inherently awkward, uncomfortable, or stressful situations. While students frequently used humour to deal with the potential threat of failure and to dilute the effect of a negative remark, some participants, particularly male students, concealed their stress through it. Women were often very open about the struggles they had in their graduate journey, whereas men would avoid mentioning anything negative or stressful. When it came to turning to other people for support with imposter syndrome, all three male students chose to deal with it independently, which was not a prevalent pattern among the female students. As widely experienced as imposter syndrome was, people did not always feel comfortable talking about it with just anybody.

Previous studies have shown that female students downplayed their skills and competencies, especially when they received praise and recognition (Campbell, 2021). Female students in this study were no exception, as they used words like "good enough" to describe their skills, even when those capabilities led to significant success. Male graduate students did not show this pattern. Instead, they were more straightforward and confident about their achievements and skills. For instance, one of the male students did not state that he did not know anything; rather, he said, "I don't know this as firm as I'm supposed to." This admission of feeling inadequate did not center around having *any* knowledge. Instead, it was about not having *enough* knowledge.

Furthermore, it did not seem like male students found it difficult to believe others' positive feedback and compliments about their academic capabilities. Instead, disbelief was common among female students. Women consistently felt inadequate compared to men, who

experienced isolated incidents of knowing less or not working hard enough. Unlike women's persistent feelings, men's imposter feelings preceded doing something for the first time. Similarly, all three male participants were straightforward enough to ask for help when needed. Male students also enjoyed talking about their abilities, personality traits, and achievements, while women were less comfortable and more embarrassed to share the same. On the flip side, men did not go into detail about their struggles and the inadequacy they claimed to experience.

All these differences make one wonder, is it perhaps because showing signs of stress, irrationality, and anxiety is considered a vulnerability or "weakness" and, thus, antithetical to the idea of masculinity? Or is it because the interviewer was a woman, and men did not feel they could share their struggles and vulnerabilities unless it were somebody belonging to the same gender? While it is hard to conclude based on three male students' behaviour, it is worth examining whether this gender norm exists among females. In terms of past literature, a study conducted by Cozzrelli & Major in 1990 (as cited in Perez, 2020) found that imposter syndrome was equally prevalent across men and women.

Alongside self-deprecating jokes, the acknowledgment that they were competent existed simultaneously, with some defending their capabilities or ending a narration with their skills and achievements. Imposter syndrome also stops highly skilled people from displaying their competencies and potentially losing out on beneficial outcomes. It adversely affects people's mental health, career, behaviour, and interpersonal relationships (Bechtoldt, 2015, as cited in Tran, 2023). There is an effect on the process of identity development, as Cheryan & Monin (2005) showed that immigrants and people of colour feared being seen as foreigners or the "other" and hence behaved in more "White American" ways, avoiding other immigrants lest

they were called out for being pretend-Americans (Marinari, 2005). Consider the following narration of Jennifer:

> Um, it… definitely limited me, in… my… experiences. Um, if there wasn't something that like immediately drew my attention, I… didn't have the motivation to, wander over and see if it would. Um, so I, that's why I say active or passive, because… [degree subject], I think, was, maybe, just the most welcoming, you know, because it was something and it, and, and it was the most… interesting to me because it *did* have that inclination for me to go, 'I wonder what this is about.' (Jennifer, 2023, Canada)

As you can see, Jennifer's narration shows how her discomfort at university affected her ability to explore and see what all the university has to offer. Interestingly, Lana also talked about how her discomfort in university made her more likely to speak for her younger classmates and challenge authority figures for making students uncomfortable with their discriminatory practices and impractical demands.

> Um… I-I think that, it made me, a little, bit, more, combative… um, in, in class, like looking. I got, and I don't even want to say combative, I only challenge somebody once. Um, but… I… would hang back a little bit… in discussion until I kind of knew where it was going. (Lana, 2023, America)

Like previous research (Bothello & Roulet, 2019) recommended, one of the participants suggested that the kinds of things that would help in changing the culture in academia that breeds imposter syndrome would be to include graduate student voices in program planning and execution as they would be able to offer the students' point of view in battling factors like discrimination, impractical demands, singular definition of success, etc. that contribute to self-

doubt and inadequacy. Introducing a mentor-mentee program would also work to familiarize new students and help them navigate student life with actual lived experiences.

Multiple interviews also suggested that the more students continued to expand their knowledge, skills, and learning, the less they felt undeserving and inadequate, as it would counter the feeling of "I don't know enough to be here." Having said that, even when students knew enough about their subjects to have things at their fingertips, it did not make their imposter syndrome go away. Additionally, changing the definition of an intelligent child could help by not equating to one's competencies in selected subjects like math and science, as that was the definition that students grew up to internalize and believe. Lastly, hosting seminars, conferences and workshops where scholars and speakers talk about their mistakes during their graduate careers and what students should not do were mentioned as strategies to humanize faculty members and counter imposter syndrome.

A subtle pattern consistent across interviews was that participants would suggest solutions based on their personal experiences and struggles. For instance, one student's recommendations were geared more toward addressing issues in interpersonal relationships because her upbringing worsened her imposter syndrome. Another participant who repeatedly highlighted how much she missed her family assumed that people in Newfoundland were kinder because they understood that students were away from loved ones and required that support. Yet another student who aspired to have active relationships with her faculty suggested that lightening the burden on professors was imperative for students to receive proper support.

A noteworthy point to consider is that the effects of adverse interactions may seem like an internal phenomenon, and individuals feel relentlessly inadequate because they had those negative experiences. However, it is far from internal, considering people exposed to those

adversities are not the only ones experiencing imposter syndrome. In a way, the reasons students give for their imposter syndrome simplify and help them understand their own feelings of inadequacy. If these explanations were a complete reflection of their self-doubt, wouldn't people who did not have those negative experiences effectively avoid having imposter syndrome? This kind of cognitive dissonance, in which people frame their experiences in a way that helps them understand things, does not practically correlate with imposter syndrome. Similar to how people are told only to fault the bad experience for their struggles, it is interesting to see how individuals commit to a storyline that helps them make sense of it. These inconsistencies also show the systematic impact shown in the section on how structure impinges on lived experience and how a neoliberal society holds the individual responsible for everything without considering structural effects. The neoliberal ideology states that if the individual is struggling with something, they must search their soul and solve the problem without expecting society to support them in any way. Thus, the neoliberal influence of society can explain this disjunct seen across interviews.

4.3. The Self Vs. People

4.3.1. Different experiences

Imposter syndrome inherently involves comparison to other people, and participants in this research were no exception to this rule. Graduate students frequently felt inadequate as they compared the differences between their situations to those of their classmates. International students often highlighted how their financial struggles were greater, as was adjusting to a different system and culture. They also mentioned how differences in experiences and backgrounds made them stick out like a sore thumb and created an inability to relate to others in their cohort. More than one international student talked about new identity development and how others who were not from their home country failed to understand their humour, so they had to change it and avoid offending others. Not only was it a loss of personality, but international students also had to contend with loss of language, culture shock, and homesickness, which is undoubtedly a given but exacerbated the feelings of inadequacy they experienced. Negative authority figures often worsened this kind of isolation:

> So, it was definitely, it felt a lot more separated. So, like, you had the big labs who kind of…they all knew each other, so you kind of had those little cliques of like big labs and then if you were involved outside of that, you could have an [says it almost laughingly] in through that. But it's also… it's hard because like, I always felt on the outside right? Like you would see people who would go and hang out in grad lounges and you would see people go and do these things together or even outside like they'd go on trips or different things. But because… One, our supervisor hadn't introduced us to people… and two, people have difficult relations with him. (Nina, 2023, America)

Thus, because of the negative power dynamics, Nina felt isolated from other students who had connections and an active social life. Another participant expected and even aspired to have a social life where students are close enough to hang out after classes and have meaningful discussions:

> Because it's like… sometimes I wonder like I'm having such a hard time like making connections, or friendships or like study groups, or like, I have none of those things. […] And, and then I sit back and go, kind of like, 'Well, this is *your* fault, because you keep going home,' and so it's like imposter syndrome about, like… my day-to-day life on top of like… my imposter syndrome about my actual, like, academics […] Like, I kind of had this… idea or like, image of grad school, of like, I'd come to school, and I'd have classes and then like, some afternoons we would, like, go and have a coffee and like, talk about like, topics… related to our field. […] I just thought there would, like, sort of be those… um… conversations outside of class and like, I guess that would be, like, the culture, [laughs] of like, the department anyways. Um, but I haven't experienced that, with *my* experience it's been very much like, come to campus come to class, classes done, we all go our separate ways. Um, and then like come back the next day for class and so like we're not really having… the kinds of conversations that, like when I was an undergrad, I would have because… I don't know, like… [laughs]. (Susan, 2023, Canada)

Instead, Susan felt isolated from the university's culture as she did not have those relationships. When asked about how her experience at her previous university developed imposter syndrome, Becky from Canada highlighted that the students in her undergraduate

years all came from strong financial backgrounds, unlike her, which made her feel inadequate from the beginning:

> Uh, I would say largely money. Like [previous university] students and the institution are… they have incredible resources. And I didn't, going in. I didn't have a lot. Well, um, my town was quite privileged. My parents had all come from nothing. And they've done an incredible job at building, but that does not give you endless resources. There's a lot of… there's a lot of international students, but not for the same reason we have a lot of international students. If you're international at [previous university], it's almost like a money show. (Becky, 2023, Canada)

Lack of sufficient finances coupled with the stress of being unable to cover expenses or going into debt was an issue that arose in multiple interviews, making students feel deficient as they struggled to survive. Alison also narrated that she could not relate to students who did not have work to survive as well as those who would study every day:

> And I couldn't also relate to the… people who were like… who can…study every day, scheduled, and with all the…program, like for me super weird. Yeah, like I really went super well in the classes, but, I will tell you *how*. [laughs] Mostly two days before the classes, I would spend the days and nights without sleeping. Reading everything, doing everything overnight. So, during the classes, I was always without sleep. […] And…that was it, actually. E-every class, that was it. That was my life. Like, and I saw, like, the others, like scheduling, like working a little bit every day. Like this is something that I never was able to, I was never able to do and seeing other people do that, it's…always weird to me. Like I

> always feel that *I* am not doing nothing. I am the problem because how can…I not do that? How can other people do that? And I cannot. And until I was able to figure out that… this is just how my brain works? [laughs] (Alison, 2023, Europe)

When categorically asked about any external factors influencing his imposter syndrome, Raj expressed that at the beginning of his degree, he felt isolated from other people because he was the only person of colour there, and other people's graduate lives included elements that he had never experienced:

> Uh, so sometimes, uh, if you like, when I was, a bit like, uh, more early on you would feel like, uh, I'm like, uh, the only person… of colour here, uh, like that's fun. Then you feel… a bit more pressure or, when you hear that, um…They talk about all like, how they got into it and they talk about these, sort of, like, core… uh, experiences like, 'I remember going to the cabin, I remember, like, uh going to the cottage,' Like I obviously didn't do… any of that. So that, it sort of, some, like, it, it… It can make you feel that your own core experience of, like, why you went into [degree subject] is… different. Like it's alienated, uh, from that. (Raj, 2023, India)

A key idea implied by participants was how universities are designed to support the ideal student who is young, has a relevant academic background, has no responsibilities and can work with the 9-5 routine. Education systems built to primarily benefit this demographic either struggle with or choose to exclude other types of students, which is where the lack of belonging stems from and why students feel like they are at a disadvantage from the moment they commence their studies:

> When… you're not, you haven't bothered to see if people need to work. You haven't… you don't understand, that they might have children… at home. Everybody's this ideal 22-year-old student, being supported by their parents from a middle-class family. That's how, and it's not just this university, m-most universities are designed and that's not their student makeup anymore. […]You know, those of us who come as international students, there are a slew of things we need to take care of continually just so we can *remain* in the country, and be legal […] Um… There's… there's things that I just need to take care of because I got to keep a roof over my head and I got to eat. You know? [pauses] I don't think those things… are taken into consideration, at least that has been *my* experience, uh, nearly… enough… because we want… we want the ideal student, don't we? As instructors. Isn't that, so much easier that they're wide-eyed and they hang on every word? (Lana, 2023, America)

Thus, Lana categorically mentioned how university systems and cultures are catered towards this demographic, which is why older students, those who have families, who cannot get by without doing part-time jobs, or who come from situations that require more accommodations struggle more because the system does not support and hence excludes them. One more participant mentioned in passing that, sometimes, professors taught in a way in which they expected everybody admitted to the department to have the same background as their present degree subject, which also alludes to the concept of the ideal student background. Many participants who took a gap between their undergraduate and graduate degrees attributed this to their self-doubt and perceived inadequacy. They often mentioned that they had trouble relating to their younger counterparts in class:

> Well… okay, I think it was from my first class. I was in it with people from very different…backgrounds and they seemed to find solutions so easy as compared to me. Like it took me a while. I have to go back home and read and the unfortunate thing was, I didn't continue my master's right after my undergrad. […] Because you know coming here is not cheap. And, I don't have a dad, my mom is a housewife, so I had to work to save my own money. So… coming here, I was like, 'Oh my God, I've wasted so many years' and catching up on old stuff because they seem to flow. Like, they just answer questions and I have to go back and be like, 'Oh yeah, I remember this from like eight years ago.' (Ellie, 2023, Ghana)

Ellie had been offered much more support during her graduate journey than in her undergraduate years. However, she still could not help feeling that international students did not possess the right skills to pursue their graduate degrees in Canada. This hindrance and the gap between her studies made her feel even more like she was at a disadvantage. First-generation, married, or older students all felt their struggles and experiences were different, leading to isolation in class, discomfort, and a lack of belonging in the program. Lily discussed how being a first-generation graduate student was stressful for her because she did not know what to expect, which made her more dependent on her supervisor:

> But I… the only time I've ever had a sense that maybe I don't belong here is I'll say I am a first-generation university graduate and I'm also a first-generation like master's student. Nobody in my family has gone to grad school or even undergraduate before." […] Um, which is… a bit nerve-wracking because it feels like everyone else knows their path and knows what they're doing and also knows

> generally what the expected outcomes are and knows what kind of careers you don't get from this, all that sort of thing. And I didn't have that knowledge coming in, which meant I was very reliant on my supervisor to provide me with these things. (Lily, 2023, Canada)

Age was a factor that stood out, as older or younger students felt like others saw them as strange due to their age difference. Fiona shared how she felt inadequate where her daughter was enrolled because she would compare herself to the older parents who had PhDs or were accomplished when she was just in her first year. At the same time, she talked about how being older in class made her feel conscious of her age. Another participant spoke about how she felt conscious and judged because her background was different from her peers:

> And, but then, sometimes you're even more self-conscious because you know your story is substantially different. That you're not coming from educated parents or you're not coming from like, 'Okay, what am I doing here?' S-So there are still mornings in my life, as many accomplishments and many jobs and positions that I've held where I still… get up and go, 'What am I doing? *What* am I doing?' [laughs] (Lana, 2023, America)

Students who had a non-linear path to their chosen field, a different academic background from their current degree subject, or had not done their undergraduate degree from the same institution also felt like they were at a disadvantage because, unlike their colleagues or classmates, they did not possess any previous knowledge about their subject or did not have those connections with faculty and staff. Consider the following narration from Holly:

> So, already I was like a bit out of my depth in some things. I mean, it wasn't difficult for me to catch up and catch on. But when you compare yourself to your

> peers, you're like, 'Ooh, I need to make sure I'm on this because I don't have the…background that they have and don't have the background that perhaps the professors assume I have.' And that's no one's fault really, I mean they're probably used to only [degree subject] students coming through, um, so they kind of teach to someone who has that same knowledge and while it wasn't like things that were crazy new, um, I was like maybe a step behind some people in some things, so that was at least in the beginning of the program kind of like, 'Ooh, I gotta, I gotta pick it up.' (Holly, 2023, Canada)

Jasmine endorsed the same point and said that her imposter syndrome stemmed from the fact that she changed her field, which meant she did not start with prior knowledge of her current field:

> Yes, because for example, because I'm switching…I'm switching fields, there are things that are new to me, e-everything that is related to [degree subject]. And uh, I did have to spend a little bit more time to…comprehend things that people, may have studied in…their undergrad. And whereas me, I come from a different field, I didn't go through those. So, yeah, that's… that's when, when I feel… the imposter syndrome. It's when I feel like I don't know things and if I compare myself to my peers. That's when I, but I, I am, I… am aware of the idea of the imposter syndrome and I know that I'm trying to, think, see things more… objectively. That's possible, yeah. (Jasmine, 2023, Europe)

Pamela talked about how she took a break from her studies, which made her feel ashamed and embarrassed that she took more time to finish her degree and no longer knew the people studying with her, making her less confident and terrified to return to university. Hence,

participants frequently highlighted their insecurities as the reasons behind their imposter syndrome. Those factors made them stand out from other students, indicating that being different was considered as something bad. Whether it was being a single parent, being Indigenous, having less educated parents, or not having a strong financial background, among other things, graduate students compared themselves to the people around them. They felt inadequate when they could not relate to others due to the differences in traits or experiences. Some would argue that this point shows how imposter syndrome is more of an internal than an external issue. However, the fact that what is normal and what is considered strange is also propagated by institutional norms and culture is precisely why university gatekeepers have a pivotal role in fostering a culture that does not, by design, breed imposter syndrome in academia.

Students working alongside their studies would also compare themselves to other students who did not need to do a job. Participants also frequently compared their undergraduate experience to their graduate life, with international students drawing a contrast between their home country and Canada. A student from HSS mentioned how “Ivy-league” universities in Canada have a more stress-inducing culture with more demands and rigidity in the structure of academia. These narrations show how people constantly drew parallels on one pretext or another, in this case, making a positive comparison between two different universities' cultures:

> I find people here [Memorial] are more people whereas at [old university name] it was more like robots that worked for the institution. So, you know there's been times when I felt like ‘Oh my God I'm not going to make this deadline, I'm not going to do this’ and then they're like ‘I'm six months behind on a book deal.’ And I’m like ‘Oh wow, that's fine. [Wow.] “‘Then, I'm probably okay.’ So I think

> there's just a little bit more realness here which has allowed me to access more resources, um, so that I feel accommodated and a little less like, you know, like I'm drowning. Um, not to say that it's not still stressful. I would just say from a mega institution, is what I'll call [old university name], to a smaller, um, institution, it's a positive experience, a positive change. (Becky, 2023, Canada)

This section highlights the factors that alienate graduate students in their programs. The ways that students navigate challenges in academia are part of the study, but it is perhaps more important to explore what kind of messaging students receive about that challenge. The image of an ideal student being young with no financial or familial responsibilities was implied in multiple interviews when participants pointed at them being older, having competing responsibilities, struggling financially, not having a relevant academic background, and having an inactive social life as the reasons for feeling inadequate. All these students did not magically come up with the same idea of the ideal student on their own, so it begs the question of what the university is doing to communicate this image, or is this idea being propagated by other students? However, it is also worth assessing whether students who fit that "ideal background" also experience imposter syndrome. If these "ideal" students are indeed concealing those feelings despite having this advantage, it is likely to reaffirm problematic norms in the identity work they are potentially doing. Since structural norms are not solely associated with the university, future research could also examine how students cope with these insecurities in ways that make it more challenging for non-traditional students.

Scholars have also shown a definite link between comparison and imposter syndrome. Craddock et al. (2011) showed that doctoral students' comparisons with peers contributed to imposter feelings. This can be analyzed from a symbolic interactionist perspective by

considering how interactions with peers and faculty and the meanings attributed to academic success and competence shape these feelings. LaDonna et al. (2018) found that social comparisons shaped physicians' perceptions of their professional identity and competence. This shows that symbolic meanings attached to success in the medical field contribute to imposter syndrome.

4.3.2. A Single Definition of Success

Students also compared themselves to the prevalent definition of success and failure in academia, as displayed by Evans' (2021) study. It is essential to consider who defines success and how everything else that does not fall in that definition is automatically ruled out as "failure." This black-and-white approach to things was consistent across interviewees, which, I argue, is related to imposter syndrome, i.e., seeing everything in extremes like success and failure, intelligent and unsmart, knowledgeable or unaware. Acknowledging that there is only one way to do things or thrive made students who could not do that feel undeserving of being in graduate school. Take the following narration from one of the female students who highlighted this same black-and-white thinking:

> I think people that I've talked to that have experienced imposter syndrome as well it's like there's only like two sides of the spectrum. It's like you either feel, like, super great because that's what everyone else is telling you, or you feel like absolute garbage and there's no in-between. Like there's no nuance to look at things and observe yourself and what you do and what you have done in like, uh, like on a blank slate, like, there's always… something that kind of interferes with it. (Brittany, 2023, Canada)

This collective philosophy depicts a society that structures success and failure and people's thinking on that as a way to see how individuals give meaning to mistakes and how this context shapes the meaning-making process. People with imposter syndrome aspire to have constant success without errors, making them doubt themselves when they cannot reach this impossible ideal. This perfectionist ideal stems from how a mistake was seen as bringing them back to square one, where they do not know "anything."

One of the ways through which graduate students defined whether they would be successful was if they managed to finish their degrees in the allotted time. This idea reinforced the self-doubting belief that they did not deserve to be in that position. Multiple participants acknowledged this pressure, and when they experienced something that delayed their graduation, they struggled to see themselves as successful and, hence, undeserving of being in the position they were in, which fueled their imposter syndrome:

> Um… it took me, hitting the delay to realize it's not the end of the world, like everyone makes it out to seem like it is, like everyone kind of makes it seem like 'Oh if you don't get this research done in six months and you're never going to be successful, you're not going to get your degree.' Or 'if you have to change, like if you're in a bad group, you have to stick with it, that's just how it is.' (Lily, 2023, Canada)

Thus, Lily mentioned how escaping a toxic academic situation meant that not only did she have to start her research again, but it also postponed her graduation. The acknowledgment among students that success equals completing their degree in the allotted time shows that even if they tried their hardest, they would not be considered successful if they could not finish their degree in that time frame. The problem here is not the cap on the number of years students should take to complete their degree. Instead, it is the idea that if they cannot do so *despite their best efforts*, they are regarded as failures or incompetent, and that notion further breeds imposter syndrome. Another participant talked about how these standards are unfounded:

> And um, what's funny is that even though they *say* like you have two months… uh, two years to do your masters or you have…You should, by your fifth semester of your PhD, you should be done with your COMPS. They don't give a crap. They

> really don't care. It doesn't, I don't…my degree, it doesn't hang on my wall less because I took an extra year to do my Masters. And my PhD, my comp knowledge won't suffer because I'll be in my sixth or seventh semester. (Becky, 2023, Canada)

As evidenced by Becky's narration, if students cannot finish their degree in the allotted time, they are still accommodated rather than booted as it would otherwise seem. Multiple things appeared to have a chicken-or-egg relationship with imposter syndrome. For instance, does imposter syndrome cause someone to finish their degree late, or does that cause imposter syndrome? Similarly, if someone has social anxiety, do those factors cause imposter syndrome, or does imposter syndrome cause a person to be introverted?

A typical pattern across interviews was that change is uncomfortable, and people do not respond well to changing circumstances, especially in the beginning. For instance, leaving an inherently negative situation, making a U-turn from your chosen degree subject, or leaning towards unconventional methods of learning and knowledge presentation were not seen in a positive light:

> You have to deal with, you know, 'you're going to deal with bad bosses in real life, you gotta deal with them in grad school.' And I-I disagree with that kind of culture in the deal. I think you should be, I think grad school is for you to figure out what you're passionate about. What you want to do for work and if you're in a situation where you're not doing what you want to do, um, I think people should be more open to changing. (Lily, 2023, Canada)

Resisting the pressure to "appear valid" by joining the rat race of publishing papers was also echoed by another interviewee to challenge the primary definition of success:

> And if I finish all of my studies and I still do that, it's not a life poorly lived. Like it's still… I'm still an academic, even if I use it somewhere else. I think that opening myself up to different avenues of what my life might look like is helpful, because as the academy changes, you know, it gets more and more concerning where there might be space for us, like jobs. Job security, all that kinda stuff. And if… and… and… You know, like I don't think that my work is less valid if I don't publish […] (Becky, 2023, Canada)

The things that students perceived as failures were also frequently brought up, and how they were considered antithetical to the meaning of success:

> I mean, I see a lot of the people with [chuckles] like, harsher supervisors who are working *way* harder than me and publishing *way* more papers than me. Um, so that's definitely made me feel a bit, um, inadequate by comparison. […] Um…definitely having like a… a rough start made me, kind of, like take a bit more time like, getting started on my project? Um, the like, the level of, like, trepidation and, sort of, nervousness made me scared to do, like, new chemical reactions. […] Um, but, like, I don't know, I just feel like what everybody else is doing is, like, so much harder. And I guess it's just because, like, I'm not doing it so I don't.. *understand* how they're doing it? But every time they *talk* about it I'm just like, 'Oh my God, what? [laughs] That sounds so hard and I'm over here, like, dog paddling.' (Pamela, 2023, Canada)

As you can see, Pamela felt inadequate because she would compare herself to how many papers other students were publishing or listen to others talk about their work that she was unfamiliar with. Some participants claimed that the definition of an intelligent child was

equivalent to being good at mathematics or science, and more than one student mentioned that they did not consider themselves smart when they were young because these subjects did not come naturally to them:

> Um, and I think that kind of contributed to it. And that also came from an earlier place of… just like, I did really well in school as a kid. I was like identified as a gifted student. [Nice!] But I'm not smart. Like I'm not, like I'm not like a, I'm not like a math, science kind of smart person. […] But it's the kind of like when you're a kid the idea of smart is like… you know how to do math, you know advanced math stuff and like all the people that I was with that were also identified as gifted were really interested in math and science so, I felt like I was out of place there. (Brittany, 2023, Canada)

Brittany's narration showed how she did not feel worthy of the praise she would get for her skills and capabilities for multiple reasons, one of them going back to her childhood when the idea of being intelligent and successful in school was linked to the ability to do well in subjects like math and science. It is also worth exploring whether there is a particular age at which self-doubt starts to creep in, to the point of imposter syndrome, considering that children do not naturally display those habits. The fact that research on imposter syndrome has increased makes one wonder what has changed in the last few decades for it to become such a prevalent issue. Many participants highlighted how their struggle with the readings in class made them feel inadequate, especially when their counterparts seemed like they had grasped the content just as they "should." This struggle was not simply a language barrier, especially considering it was also shared by Canadian graduate students, as narrated by a couple of students here:

> Yeah, so often with, like, the readings and the articles, if I don't, I wouldn't understand everything. And it took me a while to figure out, like, my prof doesn't, doesn't want us to understand *every* single thing. He just wants us to read critically and *think* about what it is. So whenever *I* would not be able to understand something, I would get really frustrated and kind of be like, 'Why would they… accept me into this university? Like, why? Why was I the one who was accepted into this? This is weird. Obviously they messed up,' that kind of thing. And… um, so that was hard. But then, like, when I finally got assignments back and I did really well, I got like 80s and above, I was like, 'Oh, okay, maybe I can actually succeed in this.' (Cindy, 2023, Canada)

Another student said:

> Um, one of the things we had to do, we had, we did the critical reading. So we would read a piece and then we would…make our comments about it. And anytime we made our comments, I felt like *my* comments were very, like, *obvious*. And everybody had these deep, meaningful things and I was like, 'Man, I didn't even think of that. I'm just looking at the surface!' That's how I felt. But then somebody else might feel the same way, but there, but I was thinking, 'Man, you guys really dug deep for that one.' But, I wouldn't say it out loud, but in my mind I was like, 'I feel like an idiot.' T-Those kinds of things made me really, I was like, 'You know what?' I, yeah, that would be, 'I don't belong here.' [chuckles] (Janet, 2023, Canada)

What's interesting is how participants frequently linked imposter syndrome to the "should be" aspect, i.e., students often felt that they *should be* putting in more hours, *should be*

saying smarter things in class discussions, *should be* knowing more people in their department, or *should be* more knowledgeable about every course, topic, and subject in their respective degrees. The idea that more knowledge equals success was alluded to by nearly every participant, that if they just "knew more" about their subject, any topic that came up in discussions, or even just people in the department, they would not doubt themselves or feel inadequate.

Participants often felt embarrassed and unsure of themselves when their ideas, opinions, and approaches to assigned readings and articles differed from their classmates' ideas or what was "expected of them" from their professors. This pattern alludes to the prevalent notion that having different ideas and opinions was considered strange and wrong, even in an era where diversity is celebrated and encouraged. Take the following narration from one of the HSS students:

> When I'm hearing people speak about their work… um… in my mind I'm like immediately going to *my* work so like I'm not really fully paying attention anymore to what's being said and the presentation is going on and I'm going, 'Did I do this? Did I say that? Did I like explain this well?' Or like, a lot of the presentations today, a lot of my classmates made like a lot of connections to the coursework. And so then I was like, 'I don't think I… have made enough connections to the coursework.' So it was very, like, comparative? Um, in the moment, and I get, like, very wrapped up and I have to, kind of, like, give my head a shake and, like, bring myself back to the class? […] Like, I can't get upset in class. I have to, like, k-keep it together [laughs]. (Susan, 2023, Canada)

> It wasn't like a mapped out, like, 'Okay I'm teaching you the intro, we go this', he just gives you the paper, so you should read this and then everyone has a discussion. So it's like reading… any old classic book, everyone has a different viewpoint. But then it felt like every viewpoint I had, was always wrong. [Why?] Because the other class had this viewpoint that was very different from mine. So, I just kept quiet, I never said anything. Because I didn't want to end up saying this and then, end up looking stupid. So… those instances, and honestly speaking, I hated that period. (Ellie, 2023, Ghana)

Ellie also stated that she felt inadequate and like she did not belong when her ideas and opinions were different from the rest of the class, to the point that she despised that time. Research has shown a connection between imposter syndrome and the lack of alignment between objective measures of success and the quality of the work in careers (Sakulku, 2011; Harvey & Katz, 1985, as cited in Cawcutt et al., 2021). Susan endorsed this point:

> Well, just like from, I don't know that I saw a course average, but just like from the discourse that we get from our professors, it's like, oh, like, this whole idea of ungrading and like, contextualizing your learning based on like, 'Are you growing from point A to point B as opposed to like, are you doing the things you need to do to get an A plus?' Um, which like with my education background, I appreciate that. […] So yeah, there's not really, like, much transparency about… things around, like, grading or like, where the expectations are. Um, and so like, it's hard to know where you fall into that and even as someone, like, how I've expressed I have high grades and I also know my work. Like I know that I, [laughs] logically

> or rationally I guess, I know that I am… an, like, an excellent student. But it's like, it's not about like that big picture for me, it's like those moments. (Susan, 2023, Canada)

She described how the lack of transparency around grading and not knowing where she stood in her courses among her peers made her feel unsure about her performance and growth in class. It also made her question whether she could consider herself successful despite knowing her ability to get good grades. Students also measured success in relative terms, i.e., when evaluating grades, they would compare it to their peers as opposed to the grade being good, average, or bad.

Holly also mentioned how the university structure made her feel more like an imposter. Since there was no yardstick through which she could gauge how her classmates were doing, not knowing where everyone stood would make her think they were doing better than her. Thus, the lack of transparency made her feel inadequate and undeserving of her place in the program:

> It's hard to, like, gauge how well you're doing sometimes? Because I know you can say like 'I got this out of a hundred' but and maybe this is a common thing maybe it's not but it's certainly something I do. I'm very like relative like I love to get an 85 but if everyone else in my class got a 95 I'm gonna feel really bad. If everyone else in my class got a 75 I'm gonna feel excellent. So it's like the number has more meaning when it's [says sheepishly] relative to something for me and I think I think other people probably feel like that too. But in university, there's not much to... You can't really, like, gauge and especially when you have different professors who have, like, different philosophies on grading. […]

> So, I think, like, that sort of, like, structure in the university probably for me at least contributes because… you feel like an imposter because you think maybe people are doing a lot better than you because you have nothing to gauge it to. Or…you think your grades aren't good but in the relative scheme they are. So, people are, like, very competitive too often times so I think that kind of structure is [sighs and says it sheepishly] difficult to navigate because I want a comparison. I want to know, like, where do I stand amongst other people, or amongst the, like, general average. (Holly, 2023, Canada)

She extended this point to explain how other students would portray that they were doing better than they actually were, and since there was no tool to gauge where everyone stood, it would hurt her own self-confidence. Multiple participants also highlighted how other people's pseudo-confidence or tendency to boast about their achievements or knowledge would make them feel uncomfortable and inadequate because they would believe that others might actually be performing better than them:

> And, I was telling my mother about this particular student in our class who, anytime I had a class with him, I'd be like 'Oh I'm failing this class.' Because he was just *too good* and… he *made* all of us seem very stupid." [Yeah.] "And my prof was like 'Funny you should say that because anytime he goes to class he feels intimidated by you guys.' I was like… 'What? Like maybe them. Not me.' [laughs] And he was like, 'Yes. He does.' I was like, 'So why… the countless talking? You're always talking in the class, give us the opportunity to say our mistakes. You're always saying', and he was like, 'No, he's just doing it to see if what he has in mind is right or wrong.' (Ellie, 2023, Ghana)

Her narration also showed how a classmate's portrayed confidence made her doubtful of herself, and apprehensive to the point where she thought she would fail that course. Many participants admitted that they doubted themselves when it seemed other students had it "all figured out." Interestingly, one of the participants admitted to acting confident because it wards people off, even though that confidence did come from the belief she had in her own capabilities:

> I feel I'm very decisive. So even if I am feeling, very insecure, I know the way I perceive and the way I speak. It looks like I know what I'm saying and people go with it. So it's very easy for me just to like, you know… [Yeah. Just kind of, put on a brave show.] Yeah, just say it confidently, and normally back, they will back off. Um, I know this is not being like good or anything […] [laughs] (Tamara, 2023, Central America)

The dilemma with making the system transparent enough for students to gauge their performance compared to others is that it may help only some people. However, the probability of students comparing themselves to others and feeling even more inadequate is also likely to increase.

> Like they need to host like a [degree subject name] conference where people come and they only talk about their screw-ups. And they're like, 'Hey, today I'm here to talk about why you should never do X-Y and Z, because I found out the hard way.' And then they'll talk about like, never doing this reaction like this. Because I think, like… [sighs] I think we learn a lot more from our screw-ups than we do from our successes, because like, the successes are…hard to relate to from person to person in the faculty? (Pamela, 2023, Canada)

Thus, Pamela's narration highlighted something profound: people only ever talk about their successes, which is harder to relate to and does not help with imposter syndrome; instead, it worsens those feelings. An idea often linked to the definition of success in academia was the number of published papers. Popularly referred to as the "publish or perish" culture in multiple studies (Bothello & Roulet, 2019), participants confirmed that people's worth in academia, faculty, and students alike was often directly related to how many papers they had published. If they published a few or none, their credibility was deemed questionable. One of the students expressed the same sentiment when outlining the structural problems within academia:

> And when I think about like, the ones that, like, are… actively working and uh, this active demand to produce and produce and produce and write and write and write and write. And this… like, in the end, it's uh, it's… capitalism. We're just producing for them and most of the time, uh, what is being p-produced, it's... [It's not a good quality either. It's just like…] No, it's not. It's just being produced because it *has* to because…someone…needs to *earn* something from that because otherwise… you know? (Alison, 2023, Europe)

Participants felt that this kind of pressure would also contribute to their self-doubt and uncertainty about whether they deserved to be there. The pressure in academia on the quantity rather than the quality of published papers was also related to students comparing themselves to other people's work and contributions, frequently determining who is more or less knowledgeable. Participants were often on the quest to be the authority on a subject, and anything that made them feel like they did not know enough made them feel like an imposter.

4.3.3. Interdependency in Graduate Life

Graduate life is challenging enough, so it is no wonder that students require more support and assistance to get through their programs successfully. Many participants discussed interdependency in graduate life in varied ways, highlighting how their connections and relationships influenced their student life. While prior literature encourages peer support to combat imposter syndrome (Stoll et al., 2021, as cited in Murray et al., 2023), it did not do away with it, and students still felt relentlessly inadequate. Ellie attributed her survival in graduate life to a couple of friends who were from her home country, as they understood her struggles with the readings in class:

> Cause I felt like the other foreigners in my class didn't understand where I was coming from. They, they, like, no matter how many times I tried it out, I'm not getting it. And they're like, 'Oh this is so simple.' "And I'm like, 'to *you*!' 'To me, it's Greek.' [laughs] It's like I'm reading something else. [says laughingly] (Ellie, 2023, Ghana)

Her appreciation of her friends came up multiple times as she explained that her ability to do her graduate degree depended on the support she got from her friends. Nearly every participant who was not from Newfoundland talked about how surprised they were by the friendly and supportive culture. This kind of support helped students feel more comfortable but, surprisingly, did not have enough impact to do away with their imposter syndrome.

Pamela also attributed her ability to do her graduate degree to her supportive supervisor, stating how she felt "lucky in that regard" as he made her comfortable enough to talk to him whenever she made a mistake or ask him questions that she perceived as "stupid":

> I'm…a 100% confident that if I had ended up with a different supervisor, I probably would not be doing my masters. [laughs] Just like the other…way that the supervisors can be with their students, I could not…bear it. I'm…very, very glad. (Pamela, 2023, Canada)

Having done a previous degree at the same institution and knowing more people was often highlighted as an advantage and helpful in navigating graduate life because it clarified any ambiguities about professors and the university's expectations and requirements, among other things. Lily expressed the same:

> Um, I think reasons that I was supported by faculty and peers was that I, since I started university here I have been active within the department. I've made an effort to get to know the professors, the grad students, the lab instructors. I've worked in the department for several years as a TA. Yeah, so I had pretty well-established relationships with all of them. (Lily, 2023, Canada)

Her narration shows the belief that she received support from peers and faculty members because she had made an effort to stay involved in her department, and the fact that she had been working there for a while also helped. Aamir from India repeatedly commented on the importance of making connections as essential to students' well-being and success in graduate life:

> I'm a kind of guy, as I said I make time to go to class, so I haven't been in other's shoes for help, but as I said we network with each other and we help each other, those who come to class, but there are people who don't come to class so they miss out the connection with the professor and then heavily dependent on other

> students who have to… who go to class or they might even rely to other paid services, paid assignments and stuff. (Aamir, 2023, India)

Aside from the interdependency, more than one participant mentioned how they used their privilege or discomfort to advocate for others who were more at risk of being penalized in their graduate careers:

> I was like, 'Oh, don't worry, we all felt lost. Even those who look like they have it, they're more lost than you. So just...' And he was like, 'Oh, you know,' I was like, 'Yes.' And then he was asking me about us professors and I was like, 'Since the beginning, the professors are good. If you have a problem, always see them and they will help you. If they can't help you, they will tell you someone who can.' So he was like, 'Okay,' so he took my contact and we've been talking. And I think now he's got a handle on it. (Ellie, 2023, Ghana)

Ellie stated how she used her initial discomfort at university to help new graduate students, one of whom was very overwhelmed. Lily talked about how she was in a much more secure position because she was a citizen and could not be kicked out of her own country:

> Um, so generally, I think my comfort in the department has shaped me in that I'm now very comfortable speaking up for myself; I'm very comfortable speaking up for others. Um, because of both that comfort level I have with some of the professors and some of the students within the department and that discomfort I experienced and wanted to get myself and others out of, kind of forced me into taking a role of speaking up and advocating. (Lily, 2023, Canada)

This advantage helped her speak up for her international counterparts experiencing negative power dynamics. Some participants also took it upon themselves to speak up for their younger classmates, with one of them stating the following:

> I just remember when I first started, um, university, I felt I didn't have time to… wait around for someone else to ask a question. And, like… even in the classroom, like in the big lecture halls or, if there's a math question or physics question, I was, I would just say like… 'Explain that again. I don't get it.' And the, you can almost hear someone, that are, like, physics majors going, [long sigh] 'Here we go again.' No, you could hear them sigh. Like, 'ugh!' And yet you could hear someone else saying, 'Oh, thank God she asked,' right? And there would be more people saying, 'Oh, thank God you asked because I didn't know!' And I was like, 'Ugh, I don't care. If you have a question, pass it to me. If you don't want to ask, I'll ask.' (Janet, 2023, Canada)

They assumed responsibility for the latter as if it was an unspoken rule that being older or closer to faculty members' age gave them more privilege and rights to speak, and faculty members were less likely to exploit or mistreat them. Another older student acknowledged that the younger the students were, the lower their place in the hierarchy, and, as a result, they were treated poorly by faculty and administration. Hence, she used her privilege as an older student to advocate for her peers. However, the downside to being an older student was that others looked at them strangely for returning to school and studying when they "should" be doing other things.

Similar to past literature indicating the importance of collectively and emotionally open spaces, such as peer support in university (Murray et al., 2023), all these narrations show how

the nature of graduate life is such that it requires students to lean on each other. It also indicates that the risk of compromising their graduate journey and not getting their degree is so intense that students facing negative power dynamics choose to go through the stress rather than "stir the pot" by going to higher-ups. The fact that oppressed individuals must constantly decide between their survival and liberation was also endorsed by Tran (2023). Professors and administrators who provide academic mentoring positively impact students' self-doubt (Gander, 2013; Dasgupta, 2011, as cited in Robertson, 2018).

However, it is unclear how much of an effect community or faculty support has on completely doing away with students' self-doubt. This dilemma could direct longitudinal or future research to gauge whether imposter syndrome ever truly disappears over time and what strategies help eliminate it. In any case, it was clear that students with more supportive supervisors and peers were more comfortable approaching them when they made mistakes. This pattern shows that the hesitation, fear, and anxiety that precede asking for help or changing one's field is reduced when caring faculty members break the gatekeeper culture. It is also worth exploring the differences in the imposter syndrome experience between students in different years of their graduate degrees. Considering that students with supportive colleagues, supervisors, and peers still experience imposter syndrome, it raises the question of what will do away with imposter thoughts and feelings.

4.4. How Structure Impinges on Lived Experience

4.4.1. Working Hard or Hardly Working Culture

In reference to chapter 2C on structural constraints and norms, literature primarily focuses on how replacing negative thoughts with positive ones, avoiding the urge to compare, and sharing these feelings, among other tactics, can help counter imposter syndrome. Rarely is it seen as a problem propagated by structural factors. Participants in my research frequently talked about how the culture in academia breeds a practice of "working yourself to the bone." They expressed how students and faculty alike are expected to work long hours, or they are considered not to be working at all. This kind of black-and-white thinking creates unrealistic, impractical demands stemming from what interviewees called "traditional academia," where work-life balance is seen as bad. The problem with this ideology is that people's worth is defined by the *excessive* amount of time they put out, which is an inherent part of the capitalist system. Consequently, students also felt guilty about being unable to *constantly* study or work on their projects due to other conflicting work demands, family, or general survival:

> So you're starting your school year, and you're rat-racing to hand these [funding applications] in. So, something takes backburner, and you're like, 'I just didn't really work,' which is another, I think again, the biggest imposter syndrome, is 'Why am I here, why am I doing this, I'm not getting paid enough to be here' […] 'Why do I feel like I'm inadequate? Why do I feel like this is a waste of everybody's time?' Because I'm struggling to survive, so then if we want the academy to continue to be a decent institution, we have to fund our students, but if I look at places like U of T and I look at Queen's, there's…they're not better. The cost of living is way worse. (Becky, 2023, Canada)

Becky pointed out her financial struggles, which led her to apply for scholarships, and how the deadlines for those were smack at the beginning of the fall semester when things were already hectic, and students were scrambling to keep up. Susan also expressed how she worked much harder than she would at a full-time job but still *felt* like she was not doing enough:

> And so, like… it's not that I'm not working hard, and yet I still have these feelings of like, I'm not working hard enough because I'm not getting it. And so like, you know, and like, when you mentioned the workforce, it's like that same idea of like, I'm not working hard enough. I can't get the promotion, but, but also being told by my superiors that I'm exceeding expectations. […] But like, it's, it's just like this… almost dissonance, I guess, between… what is hard work… what are the results of hard work […] And so like, you work hard… and… you don't get, like… adequately rewarded for it in my opinion. So then you… like, come to this conclusion that like, 'I thought I was working hard but I guess it wasn't enough' and like, maybe that's where it's coming from and like same thing in academia. (Susan, 2023, Canada)

This notion is evidence that some structural factors propagate inadequacy to the extent that students from diverse backgrounds and experiences all feel the same about the overbearing culture in academia. Lily talked about how "working yourself to death" is part of the graduate school culture; however, it is even more rampant in lab positions:

> Especially you're expected to TA and do your labs and do your own research as well as be taking courses. And… I think there's an attitude that it *has* to be your passion, which I think it's great if I'm passionate about what I study. I think it's great if you're passionate about what you study. I don't think you *have* to be overall in

the throes of passion while you're getting your degree. Um, and I think that, you know, I really disagree, and I mean maybe this is a younger generation thing of me, people would talk shit about it if they were older [almost says it laughingly], um, but I do kind of disagree with that […]

'Come in and work yourself to death' because you know it doesn't leave room for you to take care of yourself, and that's going to have a really big impact not just on your mental health while you're doing the work. But also you're going to graduate and then not know how to take care of yourself, not know who you are outside of your degree. And then you start, if you run into troubles with your research, that's also going to impact your sense of self. And I think that's a very normalised culture here. Um, that's, that's probably the biggest thing I've noticed on culture is that 'You should be working yourself to death or you're not working hard enough.' (Lily, 2023, Canada)

There's, like, constantly a culture of like…like, staying really late in the lab, coming in on the weekends. Like, we're already expected to be there 9-5, five days a week, like it's a full-time job. Like, either in the lab or at our desks writing or like, researching kind of thing. […] So there is definitely a culture of working very, very hard, um, of like, going out of your way, of doing… um, you know…things that, like, suck, in the name of, like, finishing your degree. Um, like the people at the other end of the office from us, [chuckles] O-one of them comes over, and he talks to us sometimes, and he just always sounds so goddamn miserable. He's like, 'Yeah, I'm gonna be here till nine tonight. I kind of want to

> blow my brains out.' And I'm like, 'That's not *good*!' [laughs] I don't, I don't love that, but that's like the, like the overarching culture […] But…I think, like, the culture that other supervisors have where they do make their students work harder, and a lot of the students do produce more work as a result, often makes me feel inadequate because I'm like, 'Oh shit, I'm not putting up that level of work I'm not doing that kind of thing.' I think part of it too is that I *don't* understand, [chuckles] what the other branches of [degree subject] are doing. (Pamela, 2023, Canada)

Pamela also mentioned how the overarching culture in the Faculty of Science is gruelling, and students are expected to work overtime and treat it like their whole lives. One of the students mentioned that there is an understanding that if someone has been able to make it that far to graduate school, they will put in the required effort and time and do well. However, she also mentioned how this sense of security implies that they should be doing more, which inherently creates an expectation that students should have a certain level of knowledge or skill. This unsaid expectation or pressure also made her feel like she constantly had to perform well and say well-thought-out things:

> But like for me I always feel like, because my class schedule like my actual in-class schedule is fairly light, [hurries to explain] but it's because I have a lot of other work to do outside of class but because like when I look at my schedule, I'm like well you have so much time. So, you should be using that time, as much as you can to… do other things or extra work look into things that you haven't had the time to look into before, um, but I think that's more self-imposed than it is externally imposed […] (Brittany, 2023, Canada)

This notion also indicates that some structural factors propagate this expectation that graduate students need only perform well. When asked about the culture at Memorial, another participant talked about how her department's culture was better than that of departments in the science faculty:

> Um, I would say...from what I've seen of other departments, taking ours into comparison, um, it's just generally less stressful. Now, I don't have a lot of understanding of what goes on within, like, engineering and bio...like, I know a little bit of what goes on with like [...] Yes, like, vicariously, like I know at [old university name] that the engineering kids didn't sleep. I haven't gotten that impression, so I think that the pressure is also innately less if the pace is less. […] I think, um…there are still definitely some people in our department and, like, faculty specifically that work on the old model of grind to the bone, um, 'This should be your life' and I think that really, like, cements in…uh, a feeling of imposter syndrome. A feeling of like, 'Well, I'm not working as hard as they are. I'm not doing their kind of work.' (Becky, 2023, Canada)

Other interviewees also echoed this sentiment as if it was a fact that this faculty was known for being overly stressful and demanding, which heavily contributed to imposter syndrome. Another student mentioned that studying people in the Faculty of Science would help me get more insight for my research, considering people are more likely to have imposter syndrome in those departments.

Part of the traditional ideology of grinding to the bone was that working long hours meant being serious about one's studies. Students, particularly in the Faculty of Science, echoed this sentiment where their productivity, seriousness, and desire to succeed were equated to

working overtime and long hours in the lab. Having said that, this unsaid expectation was not limited to just one faculty, which is why students in HSS also talked about burnout being rampant among students and faculty alike. Consider the following narration from a participant who attributed imposter syndrome to funding cuts to the university:

> And I think like… if our professors had more time to, like, build relationships, like for me, it's about relationships, like I don't trust my professors' positive feedback because I don't think they know me well enough [laughs] Which is like, maybe not a fair assessment, but also like, they don't have time to get to know me, because they have full teaching loads. Um, they're like totally burnt out, which is like what they've expressed to us. (Susan, 2023, Canada)

Susan's reasoning was that funding cuts inhibited the process of teacher-student relationship building, making her doubtful of how she was doing in her courses. Becky stated how the culture in academia expects students to dedicate all their time and energy to studying, and so anything else outside of it is, in a way, frowned upon. Becky further explained that part of the imposter syndrome is that people are expected to *not* believe in work-life balance. This philosophy did not suit her because having ADHD meant she could not study all the time.

This idea also alludes to the understanding that these overbearing expectations do not account for people with special needs, unique circumstances, and disabilities. The overarching culture in academia also makes one wonder what message the university sends: that students, by and large, did not believe work-life balance and success went together and that success was equated to treating their graduate degrees as their lives. The kind of support students alluded to through their narrations undoubtedly requires faculty members and staff to have enough time, training, and support to help students from varying backgrounds. As past literature has shown

(Gill & Donaghue, 2016; Loveday, 2021, as cited in Murray et al., 2023) and one of the participants also pointed out, it is vital to address structural issues of stress and overworking. This is because faculty and staff were already stretched thin, which prevented them from building relationships of support and trust with students.

4.4.2. Colonialism, Racism, and Patriarchy

A plethora of research has shown that the underrepresentation of people from different races and genders or simply being first-generation in a hegemonic white culture is enough to make individuals feel excluded (Evans, 2021; Peteet, Montgomery, & Weeks, 2015; Martinez et al., 2009; Terenzini et al., 1996; Ochs, 2022; Collins et al., 2020). Previous research has shown that discrimination is strongly connected to imposter syndrome (Cokley et al., 2013, as cited in Campbell, 2021), as unjust treatment sends a clear message to people that they do not belong in the system. It is unclear whether it is the cause of imposter syndrome, but they both worsen the effect on each other.

Similarly, many students felt inadequate as they had difficulty relating to their peers from different backgrounds and ethnicities. The absence of representation and the lack of role models for oppressed communities in academia make individuals feel like they do not belong (Campbell, 2021). Thus, it makes people believe there is no opportunity for them to succeed, and neither does it help them navigate the realities of stigmas and stereotypes to thrive (Bryant-Davis, 2021). Participants linked imposter syndrome to the prevalence of colonial (white supremacist) racist and patriarchal thinking in academia.

Some students, particularly those who had faced negative power dynamics, talked about how the structure of academia is primarily made up of rich, white men. Students frequently mentioned that the system is designed in a way that excludes women and people of colour, so it is no wonder that minorities felt that they did not belong. This pattern also indicates white privilege and how being white is enough for people to get away with different kinds of injustices. What is fascinating is that students belonging to the faculty of humanities and social sciences (HSS) were more mindful of the structural issues that existed in academia. Perhaps

this is because the subject matter of this faculty explores social issues, such as gender and racial discrimination, in comparison to traditional sciences or engineering subjects:

> Half the time people are super sweet and they're super interested about [home country] and they want to know everything and they share the words they know and super fun. But the other half of the time is very… in-your-face racism, very subtle racism. Again, you know, the sexual harassment specifically. I do believe that, it's very intertwined with racism. Like, when I talk to women, international women, about racism, it's always connected to sexual harassment. Always, always connected. And guys, although they do suffer racism, the sexual harassment is not part of it? So, it's much less. So, yeah I also think that, that feeling of 'I'm not welcome here,' even if I'm welcome, it's as a sexual object, for the consumption of… white dudes. So, that's also a thing. (Tamara, 2023, Central America)

Thus, Tamara focused on how racism was also linked to sexual harassment, which made her feel uncomfortable and unwelcome. Research has also shown that if students from minoritized backgrounds want to perform as well as their white counterparts, they must show a wider variety of characteristics outside of academic abilities (Tracey & Sedlacek, 1984). Since there was an agreement on how white supremacy is a cause for many societal and global issues, many white students displayed embarrassment when asked about their ethnicity for demographic purposes. They did not seem proud of it then, even when the discussion was not explicitly about the superiority complex that plagues societies. When asked about her ethnicity for demographic purposes, a female student concealed her embarrassment in being white by jokingly calling it "colonizer white." Lana from the U.S.A. attributed her imposter syndrome

to the colonialist perspective prevalent in academia, as a result of which students from diverse backgrounds did not feel accepted in academia and were misconstrued by others:

> There's an elitism in the academy. Um… Well, it's not just… at university, right? If you go to any school, just… again, across the global north, and, there's an elitism in teaching… I think. And, I-I don't think I know, we've been beating our head flat, you know, trying to get rid of it for a long time. And, and it stems from...defining…what needs to happen, inside of these institutions from…a colonialistic or settler…perspective. You know, to say… oh, but 'Oh, you'll have enough time to do this.' When… you're not, you haven't bothered to see if people need to work. You haven't… you don't understand, that they might have children… at home. (Lana, 2023, America)

Aside from the intimidating nature of her chosen field, one of the participants mentioned that the male-dominated culture in her department made her even more uncomfortable and felt like she did not belong:

> A few things that did make me uncomfortable were, like I said, with the kind of boys' club attitude. Um, there were, there have been… students who, uh, harassed me or who were, um, sexist or homophobic or something of the like, um, or uh, particularly older men within the department. And…that would make me feel very uncomfortable, not just around them, but like coming into work sometimes because you have to walk past them, you have to deal with them, right? (Lily, 2023, Canada)

Even with the proportion of women increasing in her department, the general attitude was that the subject was almost like the male students' property. Similar to research showing a

link between underrepresentation and imposter syndrome (Evans, 2021; Peteet, Montgomery, & Weeks, 2015; Martinez et al., 2009; Terenzini et al., 1996, as cited in Edwards, 2019; Ochs, 2022; Collins et al., 2020), another student talked about her undergraduate experience at a different university where she felt like she did not belong because there was barely any representation of women in the faculty as well as in the syllabus:

> It became an issue during my undergrad. And I *do* relate it to the fact that it was a faculty of old men, all straight dudes. And we were all, like, almost, like 99% of the students were women. And… we never learned about… writers, like female writers, we never learned about, like whenever we asked them, they would... And I remember once in my last semester, this professor was like, 'Half my syllabus is made up of women' and we're like 'Amazing we're finally going to read women' and then the format of the class was that you will get a text and you will present it. Right? And you will keep it like a discussion and presentation. And then we noticed he hadn't read the books by the women. (Tamara, 2023, Central America)

It is essential to highlight that participants felt more comfortable and safe when people belonging to their gender were present or more in number. Nearly all women echoed this sentiment, suggesting that the idea of a safe space is often tied to gender. One of the participants repeatedly remarked on the patriarchal structure of her family and her experience growing up as a girl in the family. She expressed how her family, especially her father's lack of belief in her capabilities and the pressure to "never fail" was imposed on her from a very young age, which always made her doubt herself even when her current professors encouraged and supported her:

> There is one time in my primary school and I have the best grades of my class but I think the whole grade is 100 and I have ninety…eight or 99. I am, I am the first

> one in my class but when I come home and I present the grades to my father [clears throat] and he… no smile and no surprise and he just said, 'Why didn't you get 100?' It's like… 'Yes, you are the best of your class but hey, don't be so satisfied with your grade because you are not at the full grade. You still have something to do, you still have those mistakes you need to fix.' And I think this is a very typical… story in my… younger age? (Mandy, 2023, China)

Like previous research (Parkman, 2016: 53, Clance & Imes, 1978) this pattern also shows that structural factors like family cultures and the way children are brought up have an immense impact on the definition of success and the confidence that the child internalizes and enacts as they grow. As a result, tangible achievements and successful outcomes are rendered useless when parenting styles propagate an aspiration for perfection, comparison with others, discrimination, and a lack of faith in children's abilities. As expressed in this study, the pressure to not fail and disappoint others lives in people's minds and contributes to the relentless self-doubt and inadequacy characteristic of imposter syndrome.

We can also tie this point to the idea that people with imposter syndrome are less likely to say no because they are eager to prove they belong. A couple of participants endorsed this by commenting that students who were spread incredibly thin were more willing to provide support to others. The motive is unclear, and it is not easy to distinguish whether it is because they expected to receive the same treatment when they were struggling or because they knew the struggle all too well. According to Pryal (2018), women do most of the "service work" where they cannot help but rescue others, leading them to overwork themselves. She linked this aspiration of wanting to be a "superhero" to committees and panels being all-white or all-male, where women, people of colour, and other minorities are chosen as a token to portray an

inclusive culture or "save them from their sexist or racist behaviour." One of the students echoed this same "tokenism" sentiment and clarified that nobody made her *feel* like she was selected because of her Indigenous status, but she *still* felt like she was chosen for checking that box:

> That's how I got to meet her. So, and they said, 'Yes, I have one right here,' and that's how I-I got involved, so that was the initial, so, I think… in the back of my mind, I was always thinking 'I'm here because I'm Indigenous.' (Janet, 2023, Canada)

Previous literature has also shown that exclusionary environments breed imposter syndrome. The emotional experiences of "space invaders" reflect a discriminatory structure (Puwar, 2004; Johnson & Salisbury, 2018). This systemic design supports and prefers certain groups over others, which is why those who do not fit a particular racial, gender, or ethnic background are made to feel like outsiders. Participants endorsed this same sentiment by attributing their imposter syndrome to internal causes. However, their narrations indicated a significant involvement of external factors.

Using symbolic interactionism to view discrimination, Blumer (1969) discussed social meanings and how they are attached to particular social categories like race, gender, class, etc. For example, negative stereotypes about a specific racial or ethnic group can become engrained in social meanings, leading to discriminatory behaviours and attitudes. These meanings are not inherent but are constructed and reinforced through ongoing social interactions. In Blumer's (1969) framework, symbols are the means through which people communicate and convey meanings, and they play a crucial role in perpetuating discrimination. For instance, the use of derogatory terms or exclusionary language, as exhibited in my thesis, can reinforce the perceived inferior status of marginalized groups. Additionally, symbols like job titles or roles

can signify power or the lack thereof, contributing to the underrepresentation of certain groups in higher-status positions. Symbolic actions, such as ignoring someone in a conversation, would also reinforce their marginalized status.

Furthermore, through repeated social interactions, certain discriminatory practices become normalized. For example, if women or minorities are consistently interrupted or overlooked, this pattern of interaction reinforces their lower status and contributes to their underrepresentation in leadership roles. These patterns are not just individual occurrences but reflect broader societal expectations and structures. Regarding the process of social construction, Blumer's theory underscores that social meanings and realities are constructed through interaction. Discrimination and underrepresentation are thus not natural or inevitable but result from specific social processes. These processes involve continually reproducing meanings that justify and maintain unequal power relations. For instance, the social construction of race as a category has historically involved attributing specific, often negative, meanings to certain racial groups. Through interactions in various social institutions (e.g., education, media, the workplace), these meanings become entrenched and contribute to these groups' systemic discrimination and underrepresentation.

While Blumer recognized that meanings are socially constructed, he also noted that they are not static. Discriminatory practices can be challenged and changed through new interactions and the introduction of new symbols and meanings. For example, social movements often aim to change the meanings attached to certain groups (e.g., the Civil Rights Movement). By altering symbols (e.g., reclaiming derogatory terms) and changing interaction patterns, these movements challenge and seek to dismantle existing discriminatory structures.

Other sociological literature on discrimination includes Goffman's work on the concept of visibility in relation to stigma. He distinguished between visible and concealable stigmas, highlighting that those with visible stigmas, like race or physical disability, may experience more overt forms of discrimination and exclusion. In contrast, those with concealable stigmas, like mental illness or sexual orientation, may live in constant fear of being "outed," leading to stress and anxiety. The management of stigma often involves efforts to hide or minimize the discredited attribute. Through social interactions, people constantly assess and categorize others based on their perceived attributes.

When a person is stigmatized, their "normal" identity is "spoiled" in the eyes of others. This spoiled identity often becomes the primary lens through which others view and interact with the stigmatized individual. Goffman explained that this process affects both the stigmatized person and those around them. Stigmatized individuals may feel shame, self-doubt, and a sense of exclusion, while others may feel discomfort or even hostility when interacting with them. His understanding of the role of stereotype was that it often justifies or reinforces stigmatized individuals' lower status in society. For example, stereotypes about the intelligence or work ethic of certain racial or ethnic groups can lead to their underrepresentation in educational or professional settings. These stereotypes are socially constructed and perpetuated through repeated social interactions.

Thus, stigma leads to the perpetuation of discrimination and underrepresentation through social exclusion, internalization of stigma and institutional discrimination. Stigmatized individuals are often excluded from mainstream social, economic, and political life. This exclusion is both a cause and a consequence of their underrepresentation in various domains, such as education, employment, and leadership positions. Stigmatized individuals may

internalize society's negative perceptions, leading to low self-esteem and a sense of inferiority. This internalization can result in self-limiting behaviours and reduced aspirations, further contributing to their underrepresentation. Finally, they may also face systemic barriers in institutions (e.g., discriminatory hiring practices or biased educational assessments) that reinforce their marginalized status. Prevailing stereotypes and societal norms often justify these institutional practices.

4.4.3. Lack of Support from Gatekeepers

Faculty and administrative staff play a pivotal role in creating a collaborative environment where students feel comfortable enough to approach them for guidance and support, which affects their sense of belonging and belief in their capabilities. Additionally, the effect of compassionate and helpful faculty members and administrative staff extends far and wide enough to nudge students into the fields in which they have underlying or untapped interests. A couple of students affirmed this as well:

> Some of my professors and overall, uh, the faculty that I'm in is extremely supportive. They, um, they really look for the interest of the student and try to get you where you want to be. That's the experience I've had with most of, um, my advisors and my faculty. Like I said, it was actually, it was how much I liked the faculty and, um, how open they were to discussing their projects and their research and the opportunities in the department that lured me into [degree subject]. (Lily, 2023, Canada)

Thus, it can simply be a lack of support from gatekeepers that makes students feel inadequate. Another participant highlighted the following:

> And one thing that irks me, and I wish that people would do this, when you're telling me, um, ‘Sorry, I'm not the right person.’ That's okay. ‘Talk to this person.’ CC them for me. Don't just tell me to go off on my wayside. Especially when you're the... like, ah, in my view, I believe that they are probably the secretary for that person. Um, I think that they should CC me and say, I'm sorry, so-and-so will be the one to help you with this. I've CC'd them here. But no, I just, I find that frustrating because they're the people who... I find they're, like,

gatekeepers a lot of the time. But instead of, like, opening the door for me as a student, they don't help. Um, which is frustrating. (Holly, 2023, Canada)

Much like past literature on the effect of unresponsive educators (Collins et al., 2020), Holly's narration shows how students often suffer because absent and unresponsive administrative staff do not respond at all or do not reply in helpful ways, especially when students have no idea who to go to for specific guidance. Participants frequently tied the concept of support to how vocal and willing students were when asking for help and establishing a presence in the class and department. Research on African American graduate students has also shown that the lack of opportunities to get along with a mentor and the unavailability of student support services like financial aid, etc., all contribute to individuals experiencing imposter syndrome (Ewing et al., 1996, as cited in Perez, 2020).

However, insecure or toxic faculty members who exploit and hold grudges can make or break a student's self-esteem and graduate experience, given that supervisors, in particular, tend to have immense power over the student, especially if they are tenured. Participants who had experienced some form of negative power dynamics at the hands of insecure and exploitative faculty members brought up the fact that tenure gives professors "immunity" and the freedom to get away with unfair, discriminatory treatment. Some professors would even go as far as to conceal scholarship, funding, and career development opportunities, which was also seen in previous research (Ceci & Williams, 2011; Hoppe et al., 2019). As a result, students would operate at a disadvantage, coupled with imposter syndrome, which already made them feel undeserving of applying for those opportunities. Thus, students who had a negative experience with their professors spoke about the "lasting impact" on their mental health. A couple of students highlighted that insecure and problematic professors had often been mistreated by their

supervisors, which made them vindictive or "justified" in treating their students in the same way to "build resilience." Consequently, adverse treatment contributed heavily to students' imposter feelings, as faculty members or peers consistently made them feel they did not belong or deserve to be in the program.

Irrespective of whether they had undergone negative power dynamics or not, some participants mentioned that depending on the person they were dealing with, their approach would be avoiding that faculty member or classmate as much as they could:

> I mean, I definitely felt like there were power dynamics sometimes, like...I guess...And like the bigger labs that were like, had the really interesting research and like, there felt a little bit like power dynamics. And then I just avoided them 'cause I was like, 'If I don't have to interact with you, I'm not going to interact with you.' But they are, I mean, they're definitely power dynamics between my supervisor and I. Like part of that was, I chose my battles, right? (Nina, 2023, America)

Holly was also in favour of adopting a passive approach and avoiding people who were enforcing their power unjustly. Similarly, Raj remarked that his approach with people who enforced negative power dynamics would be to focus on his own work so that his performance would speak for itself:

> I think what I tried to do in these instances is…you know, like… Trying to give the other person the benefit of the doubt, like. Like, you know…You know the truth. Like, you know, you know yourself and you know what you're capable of, to an… extent. This other person might not, so. Um, so… just, like let them say what they… have to say, but if you think that you've done what you can do,

> then… [That should be enough.] That should be enough. Yeah. And typically those people are like, hovering over your shoulder [almost laughs] in the workplace, [almost laughs], so like, they'll come in, they'll say this, say this, say whatever they have to say. And then leave, so like, I'm just, just going to keep doing what I'm doing. (Raj, 2023, India)

However, as far as his narrations showed, he had not experienced discriminatory treatment at the hands of faculty members. One participant recommended seeing faculty members as "people" rather than putting them on an inaccessible pedestal to be able to counter negative power dynamics:

> I think that, but that, like, this is mostly in a, like a student-faculty dynamic. Because you know, often times we think of the, our faculty, especially the ones we work with closely, as being like, all-knowing, they know so much, they have so many degrees, they've done so much work, um, like, their names are published in so many things. But, kind of remembering that they… are people? Which is sometimes hard to do with certain faculty because they tend to be very closed off as a person. Like you only know them as a professor, you don't know them as a, person? Um, but like knowing that they… also make mistakes, and that kind of thing, and I think that's helpful when faculty also, like… humanize themselves […] (Brittany, 2023, Canada)

It is essential to highlight that those students who had not been mistreated by an authority figure, or at least did not admit to such accounts, were more likely to suggest utopian ways for students to deal with negative authority figures. A possible reason for this passive approach was highlighted by Tran (2023), who emphasized keeping one's head down and doing

the necessary work to "succeed" as required to achieve assimilation into the dominant colonizer culture and identity in academia. According to her, imposter syndrome would persist in minoritized people until their assimilation was complete. These passive approaches also highlighted the 'intentional silence' that Tran (2023) discussed when examining power hierarchies.

Balancing the costs and potential rewards was also a common practice among students in this study who faced negative power dynamics. Students were frequently concerned about losing their funding or research opportunities through an exploitative supervisor or even their place in the program, so they chose to stick around. One of the participants mentioned that she was only waiting for her research to get approved by her supervisor. Then, she would be "done with him," indicating that she did not want to relinquish her end goal, which is why she was putting up with exploitation and oppression at the hands of her supervisor. However, it is worth asking how, while people hold on to their power, their outward actions may be unintentionally geared toward supporting the oppressive system (Tran, 2023).

Other students suggested more active ways of responding to harassment and unfair treatment that naturally depended on whether it was coming from peers or faculty members. Talking to the person responsible for creating those negative power dynamics and seeing if that actually improves things was one suggestion. If not, students suggested speaking with other students and gauging if that disrespectful treatment was a norm. The "final step" was to bring forth those issues with a superior who could end the injustice. This multi-stage process also showed that students were not immediately willing to go to higher authorities because they felt that could jeopardize their funding or chances of securing their graduate degree or, for international students, their chances of staying in the country. Students were more inclined to

do their best to maintain a positive, cordial relationship unless too much of a differential compelled them to "level the playing field." Other common suggestions included not being afraid of changing one's situation, especially if nothing good came out. This recommendation also alludes to the earlier pattern: change can be scary for many people, considering it takes individuals out of their comfort zones.

One of the participants mentioned how the lack of support from her supervisor and the negative power dynamics that existed made her feel unwelcome, uncomfortable, and timid, intensifying her feelings of imposter syndrome:

> And so I think, for me coming in, his expectation was like, 'Oh, she knows how to do things, I don't really need to worry about her.' Where like I never really made my own project before. I… Like, I did my honours project, but that had been handed to me, and I didn't have much freedom with that, which is why I wanted a project I *could* design a little bit better. Um, and then I also, some of the things I wanted to look at were a little outside of his wheelhouse." [Okay.] But you'd go to him, and you'd be like, 'Oh, I'm having trouble with this.' And it'd be like, 'Okay, figure it out, was his answer.' (Nina, 2023, America)

These factors also allude to the hierarchy of academia that puts students at the bottom, a factor one of the participants provided as a rationale behind the mistreatment of students:

> And in this position as a student for *me*, you brought me here. I'm coming… to learn, not to be berated for being inadequate, you, it is *your* responsibility, as much as it is *mine*. I know that I only get out of things what I put into them but, to make me feel welcome and help me to achieve and be the best…you know, doctoral candidate or master's candidate or budding instructor that I can be, or person that

> you're going to send out into the workforce and we still don't, that still is not a prevalent attitude. It's… a-administration and then professors and then, whoever else and then somehow students. And undergraduate students really… I feel bad for undergraduate students. (Lana, 2023, America)

Additionally, when the university would not accommodate her further for her disabilities, Becky felt like that was actual proof of her not being good enough, considering she had to work harder. Lily mentioned that her supervisor calling her names and categorically telling her she did not deserve to be in the program heavily impacted her self-doubt and sense of belonging.

As previous research also showed, many participants commented on how their struggles were more intense at the beginning of their program. Determining where to go or who to reach out to for a particular need significantly contributed to their imposter syndrome. One participant attributed her first-semester struggle to the lack of information and last-minute arrangements the student residence office propagated. Participants also mentioned that they would learn more from other students' experiences than from the administration. Holly was no exception to this feeling:

> So, I don't think the argument of saying they're so busy is valid. [chuckles] Because you can always make time or you can at least, in the example I gave of the person who just never emailed me back, at least email me back and say, 'I'm really sorry, I'm very busy right now so I don't have time to review this. If you could email me again in two weeks, I'll be less busy and I'd really appreciate it.' Because I understand people are busy, but I think it has to come down to a personal thing because I don't think there's an excuse of being busy, or this or that. So, at the end

> of the day, I think it's on the person and them not caring. And I can't say that, you know, sometimes you hear things about people, like, 'Oh, this person doesn't care about being a prof, they don't like teaching.' And you do hear that and it's hard to…not…believe it? (Holly, 2023, Canada)

She attributed the confusion and disorientation that new students feel to unsupportive gatekeepers who do not help them due to insufficient time. Faculty members who are more open and involved with students could create an environment where students feel comfortable enough to approach them with queries and problems, contributing to a sense of belonging. This point was especially true for students who had not previously studied at the same university and did not know the professors or administrative staff.

While imposter syndrome seems to be a relentless issue, that does not mean that gatekeepers cannot make structural changes. In fact, it calls for an even greater need to support students. Some participants expressed that informal lunches helped them feel comfortable approaching faculty and staff with queries and concerns. It also helped them build connections with their faculty and peers in a casual setting. One participant, in particular, expressed that it helped her form this tight-knit group from the beginning, providing her comfort throughout her studies.

Regarding the link between imposter syndrome and support, a study by Gibson-Beverly & Schwartz (2008) found that female graduate students with high attachment and self-assurance entitlement could connect positive feedback with stable internal attributes. The more people feel like they belong in a system, the less they doubt themselves. Hutchins (2015) also highlighted that imposter traits are elevated in environments where support is inconsistent, performance targets are unclear, and an overly competitive environment exists.

4.4.4. Effect of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic was another structural factor that participants frequently highlighted as impacting their imposter syndrome. Becky remarked on the pros and cons of staying in and doing her courses online. Still, she also noted how that limited her ability to establish relationships with her cohort and professors:

> I don't think either of those things impact my imposter…I actually, say probably online, I felt less like an imposter for most of my courses because like, we're just online, we're just on the computer, it's not real. When we're in class and people say like these really smart things, or they're talking about their work and like they use terms which is like a big imposter syndrome thing, all these stupid little, you know, descriptive sentences or just phrases. That makes you feel more like, 'Oh, I must be stupid.' (Becky, 2023, Canada)

Unlike previous research that showed increased imposter syndrome during the pandemic, she commented that online classes made her feel less like an imposter, which some of the other participants also endorsed. This pattern indicates that non-verbal cues and attitudes are more visible in in-person interactions and, thus, exacerbate imposter thoughts and feelings:

> Well, also with my undergrad, a lot of it was, during, COVID. Because when I started, it was 2019 and then [says it sheepishly] kicked out of residence mid-2020, which was super fun. So, a lot of it was over, over Zoom, so you never really got to actually… talk to people or like have conversations or get to know people… as well? So that was harder for me because… I have a hard time getting to know people if it's just, like, over a screen because you don't… really… see

them very much. Like, you see them on a screen and you don't actually… see how they are in person. (Cindy, 2023, Canada)

Cindy commented that she could not build relationships and conversations with people due to COVID. Janet mentioned that working with her family-like cohort kept her focused on her work before COVID-19. However, during the lockdown, she felt distant and disconnected from her peers even though she categorically stated they still had that friendship and care for each other.

The impact of the pandemic on relationships between students and staff is critical to highlight because it affected people's imposter syndrome and sense of belonging. Online classes helped keep students' imposter feelings at bay since they did not feel comparisons between peers as intensely. Nevertheless, interacting virtually impacted people's ability to develop stronger connections with each other, which has its own effect on students' imposter syndrome. Thus, interactions with others were a common denominator for students feeling relentlessly inadequate. Perhaps because people's non-verbal cues often indicate their thoughts and feelings about others, which are more visible through in-person interactions than virtual ones. Consider the following narration from a male student who talked about feelings of inadequacy when attending a conference where people seemed more accomplished and intellectual. What's fascinating is that the connection between in-person interactions and imposter syndrome is frequently linked to how confident other people seem:

That, I guess that would be more like going back to like, it's not malicious, uh, for a lot of people but you talk, when you go to the conference, I was talking to other people and they were talking about these different models and 'Have I… tried… doing this? 'What do you think about this set of people…' but then, I have, I

> didn't know everything, like everything they were asking about, but then it's like, do I just say, 'I don't know?' Or do I just say, 'Oh no, I haven't actually looked at it as yet.' It was a… Yeah, because…there's so many different people you meet and, I feel like when you do these conferences you meet people who are like, really really… [Accomplished.] Accomplished and intelligent, and it's just like, it's like, did you feel that… like, 'I don't even know, if I'm…ever gonna reach… that present level?' (Raj, 2023, India)

Fiona also attributed the difference in feeling like an imposter to interactions being in-person or virtual, with the former having more potential to make her feel inadequate:

> I'm just trying to think like…Some instances because if it's I don't really consider it too much if it's over like if I contact people over like email and stuff because I feel like the imposter syndrome more comes in when you see me face-to-face and you might judge me based on my appearance instead of my merit [...] (Fiona, 2023, Canada)

Students expressed that others made them *feel* incompetent during in-person interactions through others' attitudes and behaviour. For example, Ellie expressed that one of the students who excessively talked in class and made others feel less than made her feel like she would fail her courses. It also made her doubt herself to the point where she seriously considered deferring her admission. Another student voiced a similar point of view:

> I think like… I would get imposter syndrome the *most* in class where I'm like, interacting with other people because that's like *where*… I'm starting to get comparative because I think like when I'm doing my readings and I'm like 'I don't get it.' I think I can convince myself that like I'm going to get it eventually and I

> just need to work on it, but, like, when I'm in class, and the reading that I was struggling with at home and now people are talking about what they got out of it and I didn't get that out of it, *that's* when it like really… it for me because it's like…oh like… it's almost like, feeds into that part of my head from when I was at home doing the reading and thinking like, 'Oh I'm not smart enough to figure this out.' And then I get to class and someone says something [says it laughingly] impressive and I'm like, 'See! you're *really* [says it laughingly] not smart enough to figure this out.' (Susan, 2023, Canada)

For Susan, her feelings of inadequacy were more intense when she would interact with other students and find that their contributions in class sounded much more well thought-out and relevant than her own. On the flip side, positive interactions helped overcome or challenge people's imposter syndrome:

> I think that…when I, every time that I presented, like, the… the things that we had to do for the classes. Because I would…every time had a positive, like, feedback and… an interesting conversation…with…my peers and other professor and I think in those moments, I would kind of feel like, 'Okay, you…*can* do that, like, even if, if it was…hard, like…you…did...it…really…well, and people acknowledged that.' (Alison, 2023, Europe)

This point is important to highlight as people tend to avoid going to places or are apprehensive about it when they know someone who makes them feel inadequate will be present. It stunts their ability to be themselves or thrive in situations, which raises the question of whether imposter syndrome hinders people's skills or whether antagonistic individuals

inhibit them from performing at their optimal level. Does the cause of imposter syndrome boil down to some people making others feel inadequate?

The pattern seen in previous research on the interplay of imposter syndrome and COVID-19 was similar in some ways but different in others. For example, participants expressed the same loneliness and lack of connection with their professors and peers during the lockdown. However, unlike previous research, some students distinguished between imposter syndrome in face-to-face and virtual settings, explaining that their self-doubt was heightened in the former. In-person interactions allowed people to gauge non-verbal cues and compare to each other's views and contributions in class, exacerbating feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy. This was also seen in Fraenza's (2016) study, which explored the effect of online learning on imposter syndrome and anxiety. It showed that traditional graduate students had significantly higher imposter phenomenon scores than online graduate students. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, institutional norms and social cues of peers and instructors that are more apparent through in-person interactions made students feel more pressured compared to virtual settings. This kind of social influence shows that the meanings attached to online versus traditional academic interactions impact individuals' self-perceptions and feelings of legitimacy.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Understanding imposter syndrome as a sociological issue is imperative because it refrains from attributing elements to the individual that are inherently outside their control. My study found that while people view imposter syndrome as an internal issue, participants' narrations revealed the impact of structural constraints on their self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy. It is essential to acknowledge that due to time constraints and lack of voluntary participation from different social groups, future research can perhaps ensure a more proportionate distribution between genders, races, and Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

In summary, chapter 4A on saving face outlined how individuals created a moral self through their narrations and showcased their skills, achievements, and level of knowledge as if those aspects confirmed that they deserve to have a place in their graduate programs. It also indicated the difficulty of attributing imposter syndrome to external factors. This pattern extended into chapter 4B of the results, which focused on the perceived internal causes of imposter syndrome and the strategies participants adopted to deal with feelings of inadequacy. It showed how students insisted on viewing imposter syndrome as internal even while highlighting external causes, depicting the neoliberal thinking of excluding structural effects and support.

Chapter 4C of the results section showed how participants consistently drew comparisons between others and their own experiences, struggles, personality traits, and all the places where they differed or lacked something. The section also recognized a prevalent definition of success and failure acknowledged by all the participants and the importance of having supportive peers in graduate life, which impacted imposter syndrome. Finally, chapter 4D of the findings revealed how the effect of discrimination, lack of support from faculty

members and administrative staff, and tying students' worth to working long hours or relentlessly producing was enough to make graduate students question their abilities despite evident tangible proof of their competencies.

This study also pointed towards the subtle messaging that educational institutions propagate, which makes students feel undeserving of their place in the program, and how this inadequacy extends beyond capabilities, accolades, backgrounds, race, gender, and local and international status. Anything perceived as different from "ordinary" circumstances, like continuing studies without breaks, being a "young" graduate student, having competing responsibilities, having an active social life, or having a relevant academic background, made students doubt themselves relentlessly. These perceived insecurities raise the question of where and how the definition of success and failure emerges in academia, especially when students from varying backgrounds and experiences all have similar ideas regarding the same. Findings from the study can inform educators and policymakers of the need to create a more inclusive academic experience that better supports students and staff. It can also help people experiencing imposter syndrome recognize subconscious pressures in academia to avoid falling for them (Campbell, 2021). My research can also help acknowledge and eventually address how people experience discrimination and help put more emphasis on systemic factors rather than internal conflicts by understanding it from a social constructionist perspective. It can also add to the understanding of a toxic hustling culture that breeds burnout and unhealthy, unbalanced lifestyles of all work and no play in academia.

Considering that few pieces of research focus on imposter syndrome as a sociological problem, this thesis contributes to that conversation by studying Canadian and international graduate students across disciplines, genders, and ethnicities. By using in-depth interviews to

uncover the meaning behind students' experiences of imposter syndrome in university settings, this paper provided an overview of the institutional structures seeking to disadvantage them. It also used the participants' responses to identify the causes and impacts of persistent self-doubt and inadequacy on graduate students in Canada. Finally, it assessed how the structure-induced imposter syndrome solidifies the hierarchal strata that initially caused it, propagating a recurring cycle of discrimination.

5.1. Connection between literature and findings

5.1.1. Saving Face and Storytelling

There are several reasons why the idea of impression management is relevant to my study on saving face. My findings demonstrate that imposter syndrome is closely linked to saving face, unlike previous research that has not established a connection between the two. For example, it showed that people who experience imposter syndrome lack a sense of belonging due to the system treating minoritized individuals like “the other.” Thus, they overcompensate by adhering to the culture of working themselves to the bone. These people also silently undergo discrimination for fear of being penalized or “failing” at following instructions, all in the hope of successfully assimilating into the system. Much like the study by Lim & Bowers (1991:420), my results also showed that participants were less likely to say no to things that would help them assimilate into the system. Similar to Merkin’s (2017) study, students also chose to avoid criticizing people or places in their narrations to avoid embarrassment or shame being associated with their identities. Goffman’s (1959) idea of impression management was consistent across all twenty interviews when participants showcased their skills by talking about their achievements. As Felix et al. (2023) showed, my research also demonstrated how people regularly tell stories to create and manage their

identities effectively. Participants in my study insisted on viewing imposter syndrome as an internal issue. This was consistent with Bacevic's (2019) study, which showed how structural elements create pressures in academia, just like individuals' complicity in internalizing neoliberal identities and practices do.

Perhaps two of the novel differences between prior literature and my findings on "saving face" were the strategic use of the word "interesting" to mask negative emotions and highlighting the pros and cons to give a neutral point of view. The discomfort and fear associated with saying anything remotely negative about places or people was also new, as was the link between a mental health diagnosis and the prevalence of imposter syndrome among students. Similarly, my findings also highlighted the "should-be" aspect, which showed how there was a prevalent definition of success in academia that students measured themselves against. As you can see, this study fills the gap between imposter syndrome and the concept of saving face and highlights these generic social processes in relation to imposter syndrome, which have not been explored otherwise.

5.1.2. Discrimination and Underrepresentation

Similar to previous literature (Evans, 2021; Peteet et al., 2015; Martinez et al., 2009; Terenzini et al., 1996; Ochs, 2022; Collins et al., 2020; Watson & Betts, 2010), my findings also showed that imposter feelings emerge in environments that are inherently male-dominated or have less to no minoritized individuals present. The more different groups were represented in academia, the more students from those groups felt at ease, which was consistent with previous literature. One of the new findings was that students in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences were more aware of structural issues in academia in their link to imposter syndrome. My research also gave birth to the term "ideal student background," highlighting

how academia is inherently not as inclusive or supportive in accommodating students who do not fit into a particular prototype. Furthermore, participants in my study displayed shame for being white, given the societal problems that have emerged from a white supremacist mindset. Thus, while scholars have studied the link between imposter syndrome and discrimination in recent years, my research provides a call to action in light of the findings and asks what message institutions impart for students belonging to different social groups to feel relentlessly inadequate.

5.1.3. Structural Constraints and Norms

One of the similarities between previous literature and my findings is the equating of achievements with the individual's self-worth. Like previous literature (Johnson & Smith, 2019; Edwards, 2019; Perez, 2020), my study also showed how people insisted on attributing their imposter syndrome to internal causes rather than structural factors. Consistent with Tran's (2023) findings, my findings also depicted how graduate students chose between liberation and survival when oppressed by faculty members or senior students. Her concept of "intentional silence" that maintains the status quo and avoids disruption was seen especially among international students who had more to lose than their Canadian counterparts. Another consistent finding between previous literature and my research was that individuals experiencing imposter syndrome were not swayed by their achievements. This highlights an element of distrust in other people's positive feedback of them. The link between microaggressions and imposter syndrome was also prevalent in my study, including how the effect of imposter syndrome lasts in students who progress to become faculty members. In terms of other structural constraints, my findings were consistent with previous literature on the pandemic worsening feelings of isolation (Bedwell & B.J., 2022; Savya et al., 2022;

Kang, 2021; Christie et al., 2008; Lederer et al., 2020). The comparative effect of the lockdown on students in different years of graduate programs and the impact of a highly demanding family on imposter syndrome were seen in a couple of participants. However, these elements were not explored enough to draw patterns in the data, which could direct future research. Another constant finding between previous literature (Murray et al., 2023) and my study was the acknowledgement that simply talking about imposter syndrome is not enough to address structural inequalities. Similarly, when students had support from faculty and administration, they were more comfortable approaching them and forming bonds that directly impact a sense of belonging.

However, my study simultaneously showed that support from gatekeepers is not enough to do away with imposter syndrome. Thus, my findings recurringly posed the question of whether there is even an end to imposter syndrome. Another difference was that my research did not assume that men do not experience imposter syndrome, but rather, it considered the differences in how they felt inadequate. Unlike women, men felt anxious and equated that temporary stress to imposter syndrome, which is more pervasive and relentless. Another distinction was that my findings showed a latent effect of the pandemic on imposter syndrome. Some students felt better attending online classes as not seeing their classmates in person prevented them from comparing and being impacted by others' in-class contributions and portrayed confidence.

5.1.4. Organizational Definition of Failure

Consistent with previous research (Tran, 2023) about using the term imposter syndrome and its resulting medicalization, this was also seen in my thesis, where some participants discussed it as an affliction. Unlike previous literature referenced in chapter 2D,

my findings show the simultaneous presence of self-confidence and self-doubt. Participants were certain they had the required skills but still felt relentlessly doubtful of their capabilities to achieve their goals. This point also suggests that imposter syndrome is more connected to external factors than internal ones. The nature of black-and-white thinking and the standard of knowing everything or knowing nothing among graduate students was consistent with Haas & Shaffir's (1977) "cloak of competence."

One of the differences in my study was that students showed the desire to not appear arrogant by "excessively" talking about their skills and achievements but subtly mentioning these things through their narrations. I came up with the term "knowledge is power," as participants routinely showed that they would consider themselves successful if they knew more about their field or more people in their department. Students' use of absolute terms while talking about themselves and others' capabilities was also a unique observation of my study. Whenever I affirmed positive elements in their situation, participants quickly pointed out negative aspects as if to highlight that their troubles were legitimate. This observation has not been highlighted in previous research. Another unique finding of my research was that some students had more faith in their academic capabilities than their abilities to be liked or desired. Therefore, while the literature primarily focuses on all the internal factors (Johnson & Smith, 2019; Edwards, 2019; Perez, 2020), my findings show that these patterns are bigger than any individual. It also indicates that this area of viewing imposter syndrome as a sociological issue needs more work.

5.2. Future Directions

Perhaps future research can focus on whether there is an end to imposter syndrome, as participants consistently pointed out its permanence or relentless nature. Scholars can look into the implications of structural issues that breed imposter syndrome in academia and the workplace for social work, academic institutions, and policymaking. It could also explore the intersectional nature of imposter syndrome by examining how factors such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, and other identities overlap to shape individuals' experiences. It is also worth exploring how students cope with perceived insecurities in ways that make it more challenging for non-traditional students. Moreover, it is worth looking into whether people's imposter syndrome makes them work harder or forces them to give up faster. Even if we are to assume that imposter syndrome makes people persevere, the negatives still outweigh the positives.

Future research could also explore how and why structural factors are conveniently left out of the discussion of imposter syndrome when it is only an ever-increasing issue in academia and the workplace. Based on my study's findings, scholars could also examine the link between imposter syndrome and the comparative effect of the lockdown on students in different years of graduate programs, plus the impact of a highly demanding family on feelings of inadequacy. There is also merit in exploring the relationship between mental health issues and imposter syndrome, considering multiple participants established a link between the two. Another topic that could bear fruit for longitudinal research is studying how much of an effect community or faculty support has on completely chipping away at students' imposter syndrome. This dilemma could also help determine whether imposter syndrome truly disappears over time and what strategies help eliminate it. Scholars could also ensure a more

proportionate distribution between genders and races and Indigenous and non-Indigenous people for a nuanced understanding of their lived experiences. Additionally, it is worth asking who is most afflicted by imposter syndrome: are the people who have not yet learnt how to hide these feelings or those who have learnt how to compartmentalize them? Does imposter syndrome go away or just get shelved because people do not have time to think about their place in the system? These questions could be answered by interviewing senior scholars about their experiences of imposter syndrome over time. For example, a large part of men's identity is in their work. So, when they retire, do they start questioning their identity again? Does their imposter syndrome go away, or does it come back? These types of empirical questions would be fascinating to explore and provide insight into the temporal and contextual aspects of people's situations.

Chapter 6: References

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Chapter 7: Appendix - Interview Guide

Introduction

I will tell you a little about who I am and the purpose of this interview. My name is Nida, and I am a graduate student at MUN, pursuing my Master of Arts (M.A.) in Sociology. My research will help to understand your experience of imposter syndrome within the context of academia. I am interested in this because feeling inadequate is common. The fact that it is so prevalent across cultures and identities begs the question of "why" and the need to understand it from a sociological angle. The interview should take approximately 45 minutes unless you require more time to discuss your experiences. Anything that you say will be treated as confidential and if there is any question that you do not wish to answer, you may choose to decline.

You may withdraw from the research without penalty until the end of the data collection period (January 28, 2024), after which your input cannot be removed from the study. If you choose to withdraw from the project, your interview recordings, transcripts, and related data will be removed from the project. Interview materials will be kept on a password-protected computer. Your name will not appear on the audio file or interview transcript. A separate password-protected file will link participant names with identification numbers. Every reasonable effort will be made to protect your confidentiality when reporting research results where you will not be identifiable. Interview transcript quotes may be used in conference papers, journal articles, books, or research reports. Your name will not be attached to these quotations. Pseudonyms will be used for all quotations and will be edited to remove identifying details. If you have any questions about this study after the interview, please feel free to contact me at naelias@mun.ca.

1. So, let's start with your chosen faculty. How did you decide on the field you are currently in?
2. How do you think people have supported you or not? **Prompt:** Can you think of any reasons why you have been (or not) supported by your peers or faculty?
3. How would you describe the overall culture and norms within the university environment?
4. Did you immediately feel comfortable in your department/class/university? **Prompt:** Can you think of how your comfort/discomfort shaped you and in what aspect(s)?
5. As you know, I am interested in feelings of imposter syndrome. Can you think of any instances where you felt inadequate or did not belong? **Prompt:** Was there any particular reason that made you feel like an outsider?
6. Are there any people you turn to when you feel this way, as you describe it? **Prompt:** How do they help you deal with it?
7. Reflecting on your journey as a graduate student, have there been any moments or experiences that have helped you challenge or overcome imposter syndrome? **Prompt:** What lessons have you learned from those experiences?
8. From your personal experiences or interactions with others, can you share any strategies you used to navigate power dynamics within academia?
9. Is there anything else you want to add?

Conclusion

That marks the end of my questions. Thank you so much for your participation. A summary report for participants will be created when the project is completed. Would you like

to receive a copy of the report? Do you have any other questions, comments, or points I should know about this topic?

Interview #:

Respondent's gender:

Respondent's Race/Ethnicity:

Department: Major:

Date of Interview:

M.A. / Ph.D.: Year in program: