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The Impostor Phenomenon Among Racially Minoritised University Students: A Quantitative Study

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

Research around the impostor phenomenon (IP) points to higher susceptibility in women and racial and/or ethnic minorities. The present study investigated the role of IP in Black female university students' academic experience. A cross-sectional online survey was conducted to examine the relationship between IP, academic performance, academic satisfaction and sense of belonging. 202 Black female participants, who were currently enrolled university students in the UK and US, took part in the study. Findings suggest that as feelings of being an impostor increased, participants reported lower belongingness, reduced task and citizenship performance and lower satisfaction with their universities. Sense of belonging mediated the effect of IP on school satisfaction and student performance measures. These findings are in line with existing literature on stereotype threat which suggests that belonging to gender- or race-stigmatised social groups can be disruptive enough to interfere with one's capabilities and alter performance.

Full paper

The awarding gap in higher education is a critical factor in student outcomes since this has identified a differential in attaining a 'good'

degree between students racialised as Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME). While the sector gap is reducing (reported at 13.2% by Universities UK & NUS, 2019) with considerable efforts to eliminate shortcomings amongst BAME students, the Office for Students (2019) has mandated that this gap be made absolute by 2030. However, several thorny issues slow this progress and negatively affect students' well-being and academic experiences.

Success markers for student attainment and retention can be varied and complex and relate to multiple personal, social, environmental and wellbeing constructs. However, it is increasingly clear that university experiences are highly mediated by how welcoming, friendly, and supportive university communities are. Research has shown that students from racial and ethnic minorities face ongoing racial adversities and racialised stressors, including but not limited to a hostile and racially insensitive climate on campus (AdvanceHE, 2019; Universities UK & NUS, 2019; Arday & Mirza, 2018; Cokley et al., 2017). Navigating racial discrimination as well as an unsupportive campus environment gives rise to a series of harmful psychological experiences (McClain et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2007), impairs academic performance (Walton & Cohen, 2007; Solórzano et al., 2000), and can altogether intensify the feeling of being an impostor (McGee et al., 2021; Cockley et al., 2013).

Research around Black students' sense of belonging on campus has shown that they are subjected to increased stigmatisation, alienation and discrimination (Lewis et al., 2021; Stone et al., 2018; Walton & Cohen, 2007). These factors can affect academic achievement and cause negative psychological well-being (Tinto, 2017). Scholarship around the impostor phenomenon (IP) points to higher susceptibility in women and argues that gender plays a unique role (Clance & Imes, 1978; McGregor et al., 2008; Bernard et al., 2017). Furthermore, IP has been evidenced in African Americans and other racial and ethnic minorities (Cokley et al., 2013; Peteet et al., 2015a; Peteet et al., 2015b), suggesting the role of racial identity as a contributory factor.

The present study investigated the role of IP in Black female university students' academic experience. Researchers conducted an online cross-sectional survey to examine the relationship between IP, academic performance, academic satisfaction and sense of

belonging. 202 Black female participants aged 18-48 (M = 22.73, SD = 5.52) were recruited through Prolific to take part in the study. They were currently enrolled university students in the UK and US. Participants completed a series of self-reporting attitude measures linked to academic learning.

Findings suggest that there is no significant difference in levels of IP among US and UK based participants. As feelings of being an impostor increased, participants reported lower belongingness, reduced task and citizenship performance and lower satisfaction with their universities. Sense of belonging mediated the effect of IP on school satisfaction and student performance measures; task performance, and citizenship performance. When we look at the relationship between these variables, feelings of being an impostor can reduce students' sense of belonging. This reduced sense of belonging then leads to a reduction in academic satisfaction and academic performance. These findings are in line with existing literature on stereotype threat which suggests that belonging to gender- or race-stigmatised social groups can be disruptive enough to interfere with one's capabilities and alter performance (Neblett et al., 2016; Shiner & Noden, 2014).

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