

## The Impostor Phenomenon Among Racially Minoritised Students: A Qualitative Study

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### Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

### Abstract

This paper reports high-level findings from qualitative research, which used focus groups to explore IP and belonging in Black female students at UK universities. Described as the feeling of being a fraud or 'phoney', the impostor phenomenon (IP) is associated with negative thoughts and behaviours, including poor mental health, low self-esteem, depression, and perfectionism. Research points to Black female students as a context of students with a marginalised identity for which less is known about their experiences of the phenomenon. Four themes were generated around contexts of IP realisation, maintenance, impact, and confrontation - all tied to students' racialised identities. Narratives revealed a sense of unbelonging, the development of impostorism tied to secondary school experiences, and the need for safe 'spaces' to explore experiences and reinforce authenticity. For some participants, the university provided a safe space.

### Full paper

The purpose of this paper is to convey findings from a project designed to explore the intersection of being a Black and female university student at a UK university and the impostor phenomenon (IP). Scholarship around IP points to higher susceptibility in women (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 total effect of IP damages well-being, particularly among Black students who already navigate vulnerabilities associated with a racialised identity. Research around Black students' sense of belonging on campus has explicitly evidenced that they are subjected to increased alienation, stigmatisation, racial microaggressions and discrimination (Lewis et al., 2021; Stone et al., 2018; Walton & Cohen, 2007). These factors can cause negative psychological well-being and affect academic achievement and retention (Tinto, 2017). Although some research points to positive associations with being Black and belonging to Black racial groups, such as increased self-esteem (Lige et al., 2017) and improved well-being (Bécares et al., 2012), evidence increasingly links higher susceptibility of IP to Black female students, particularly in the context of racial discrimination (Cokley et al., 2015; Bernard et al., 2017). However, there is a lack of research inquiries with Black female university students in the UK that explicitly investigate their experiences of IP.

The authors met the aim of the project by conducting a qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of student experiences. A further quantitative study (not reported here) was also carried out. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to explore university experiences, feelings of being an imposter and sense of belonging with student focus groups. The participants (N =10) reported studying subjects that included Chemistry, Law and Psychology. Four themes were generated: IP realisation, maintenance, impact, and confrontation - all tied to students' racialised identities. Analysis revealed that educational establishments, particularly secondary schools, acted as a precursor for feelings of inauthenticity that instilled and nourished feelings of IP into higher education. Secondary schools function in a tradition that, perhaps unwittingly, permits a form of prejudice toward Black students. Academic mistreatment was noted by participants in confusing scenarios where they were labelled as not 'good enough' juxtaposed with remarks of being 'gifted'. Mixed messages resulted in an overly optimistic sense of their academic ability that lacked parity with their university experiences. Some participants admitted feeling their

acceptance at a prestigious university was down to luck or a failure in the system. These views typify an IP identity (Clance & Imes, 1978; Hope et al., 2015; Stone et al., 2018) that was further highlighted in these participants as feelings of confusion, doubts about their capabilities and achievements, and isolation. These experiences culminated in a strong sense of unbelonging (Simon, 2021).

By contrast, the university environment appeared to have a moderating effect on the feeling of being an impostor, which was an unexpected finding given the difficulties minoritised students face at universities (AdvanceHE, 2019; Arday & Mirza, 2018). Generally, the universities these participants attended were viewed as diverse and, mostly, welcoming. Participants felt they could be 'authentic' in expressing their cultural identity, especially in what they constituted as 'safe spaces'. This finding suggests that when students feel accepted in ways that do not reference or highlight diverse social characteristics as 'othered', sense of belonging can increase to their university communities. Research has also shown the importance of sense of belonging for students with a range of characteristics (Freeman et al., 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Thomas, 2012), and there is a powerful effect on well-being and academic achievement in minoritised students (Graham & McClain, 2019; Lewis et al., 2021).

Universities can take action to improve student belonging, academic achievement and attainment while also recognising that tackling the development of an impostor identity should be prioritised at the secondary school level as part of a cohesive effort. One example is to create 'safe spaces' where students can discuss their lived experiences of IP without fear of criticism. Positive actions that align with improving the ethnic representation of staff in HE can yield benefits for reducing a sense of onliness and unbelonging in students who see themselves as marginalised. Furthermore, we need to understand IP experiences in trans students and students with disabilities. Future studies should explore ways schools and universities can work collaboratively to reduce a sense of impostorism in students most likely to be affected.

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