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Deindividualising imposter syndrome: imposter work among marginalised STEMM undergraduates in the UK

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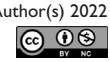
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Abstract

Imposter syndrome is the experience of persistently feeling like a fraud despite one's achievements. This article explores student experiences of imposter syndrome, based on 27 interviews with marginalised STEMM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine) undergraduates at two pre-1992 elite UK universities. We argue that imposter feelings are a form of unevenly distributed emotional work, which we call imposter work. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's 'diversity work' concept we explore how marginalised students' imposter feelings are often in response to, and reinforced by, the exclusionary atmosphere of university, resulting in more imposter work to survive and thrive at university. Three key themes are explored – the situated and relational nature of imposter feelings; the uneven distribution of imposter work; and the myth of individual overcoming – before concluding with suggestions for collective responses to addressing imposter feelings.

Keywords

diversity work, higher education, imposter syndrome, inequality, STEMM, students, UK universities

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Introduction

Imposter syndrome describes persistently feeling like a fraud despite one's achievements, often with the fear that one will be exposed. Rooted in psychotherapy (Clance and Imes, 1978), imposter syndrome has entered popular usage, particularly in universities, helping many people name their experiences of feeling like an imposter. However, such popular usage often presents imposter syndrome as an individual issue, ignoring the social and institutional contexts that produce a spectrum of imposter feelings in differently positioned people. Recent media and popular political discussions of imposter syndrome have challenged the individualising 'diagnosis' of imposter syndrome and understandings that sideline structural inequalities (Olah, 2019: 101–113; Tulshyan and Burey, 2021). Similarly, imposter syndrome has been reconceptualised in sociological literature as a 'public feeling', a collective experience happening in relation to specific places, spaces and groups, and intersecting forms of marginalisation (Breeze, 2018; Breeze et al., 2022; Taylor and Breeze, 2020). Such interventions contribute to long-running discussions by feminist, anti-racist, working-class, queer and disability studies scholars who have explored exclusionary institutions and the emotional dynamics of oppression, including Ahmed's (2012, 2014, 2017) work on higher education and the sociality of emotions, which we use to frame our discussion. We draw on these critical understandings of imposter syndrome and the felt experience of marginality in institutions, using the term imposter feelings to depathologise the experience.

This article explores undergraduate student experiences of imposter feelings in the UK based on 27 in-depth interviews with marginalised students from Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine (STEMM) degrees. This draws on a larger study exploring the identity development of underrepresented students in STEMM at two pre-1992 elite universities in the UK. In this article, we use the term marginalised and focus on the intersections of gender, sexuality, disability, class and 'race', emphasising that many students are not just numerically underrepresented in higher education (HE), but also experience intersecting forms of marginalisation, within and beyond UK HE, that affect their experiences as students. We begin by conceptualising imposter syndrome, drawing on critical sociological discussions of imposter feelings and broader work on inequalities in UK universities, before outlining our methodology. From this we explore three analytic themes – (1) the situated and relational nature of imposter feelings; (2) the disproportionate imposter work done by marginalised students; and (3) the myth of individual overcoming – before concluding with suggestions for collective and institutional responses to imposter feelings. We argue that imposter feelings are a form of unevenly distributed emotional work, which we call *imposter work*, drawing on Ahmed's concept of diversity work and the sociality of emotions. Students expend time and energy doing emotional work to navigate imposter feelings, with marginalised students experiencing more persistent and intense imposter feelings than their more privileged peers, often in response to, and reinforced by, the exclusionary atmosphere of the university. In short, marginalised students do more imposter work to survive and thrive at university in response to structural inequality.

Conceptualising Imposter Syndrome

Clance and Imes (1978: 241) coined the term imposter phenomenon to describe 'an internal experience of intellectual phoniness' among 'high-achieving' women who 'persist in believing that they are really not bright and have fooled anyone who thinks otherwise' despite their achievements. Their psychotherapeutic approach drew on the experiences of 178 women, primarily white and middle-/upper-class academics and students in the USA, and acknowledged the influence of gender stereotyping on imposter phenomenon. This work generated an expansive literature on imposter phenomenon and, the more commonly used term, imposter syndrome, much of which focuses on the disproportionate impact on marginalised groups. For example, Parkman's (2016: 55–56) literature review highlights that imposter phenomenon is experienced at higher levels among minoritised students. While this connection between imposter syndrome and marginality is well established, much of this is done through large-scale US psychological survey data, mostly in HE. There is lack of qualitative and intersectional research, and limited focus on imposter syndrome in the UK context, but this is shifting with notable exceptions including: Rodriguez et al.'s (2019) exploration of Latina STEMM student experiences in the USA; Friedman et al.'s (2021: 725) research on working-class professionals in the UK discusses imposter syndrome and the effect of the intersections of race, gender and class; Chapman's (2017) qualitative exploration of mature students' imposter syndrome around assessments in the UK; and some largely small-scale and autoethnographic pieces by academics in the UK, for example, Wilks (2020).

A major intervention in the field comes from Addison et al.'s (2022) edited collection on imposter syndrome, alongside previous work (Breeze, 2018; Taylor and Breeze, 2020), which highlight the social and contextual factors that produce imposter feelings, the importance of intersecting forms of marginality and critically interrogate the conceptualisation of imposter syndrome itself. While much of the literature focuses on imposter syndrome as an internal experience to overcome or manage, retaining a pathologising and individualising conceptualisation of it as a 'syndrome', Breeze (2018: 195) discusses imposter syndrome as a 'public feeling' whereby imposter feelings cannot be understood out of social context. Imposter syndrome as a public feeling turns the analytic lens back onto society and institutions rather than individuals, highlighting how internalisation of structural issues produces imposter feelings. For example, Edwards' (2019: 23) reflections on her experience of self-doubt as a young Black woman in US academia, arguing that this is 'illustrative of systematic issues' and linking imposter syndrome to 'stereotype threat' – the fear of confirming or being judged against a negative stereotype of one's social group.

This reconceptualisation of imposter syndrome challenges 'deficit models' that put the onus on marginalised staff and students to change, rather than the structures of UK HE. Breeze (2018: 211–212) reframes academics' imposter feelings as a critique of the parameters of success in academia rather than individual self-deficiency, challenging the individualised and competitive 'meritocratic' constructions of success and failure in the 'neoliberalising university' (Loveday, 2021: 904). Instead, Taylor and Breeze (2020: 2) argue for an imposter positionality: 'a claimed outsider-on-the-inside academic location', through which marginalised groups' imposter feelings tell us something about the

exclusionary nature of the institution and provide a position from which to critique the university. However, not all outsiders experience UK HE in the same way. Some imposter discussions can homogenise and flatten the impact of intersecting marginality that produce profoundly differential effects. For example, Taylor and Breeze (2020) argue that some claims of being an imposter gloss over structural inequalities, for example, blanket discussions of early career status among academics without acknowledging intersecting inequalities within this group. This critique complicates both common advice to talk about imposter syndrome and the use of public 'confessions' of imposter feelings, as these pose more risks for minoritised academics, individualise imposter feelings and avoid the structural reasons that produce imposter feelings (Breeze et al., 2022).

This reframing of imposter syndrome connects to broader sociological critiques of UK HE and the felt response to its structural problems. Loveday (2016, 2018, 2021) argues the felt symptoms of inequality become misrecognised as 'deficiency of the self' (Loveday, 2016: 1143) in an increasingly competitive and individualising UK HE sector, which is highly classed and gendered. This connects to broader individualising discourses around success for fixed-term academics (Loveday, 2018), which position 'failure' as a personal responsibility. Similarly, the increasing use of worker-focused well-being services, apps and workshops that put the responsibility on individual academics to manage structural issues of overwork and extreme stress (Gill and Donaghue, 2016). While some of these discussions focus on staff, the individualisation and felt experience of structural problems in UK HE also applies to students. Our conceptualisation of imposter feelings is orientated towards structural understandings of these feelings; how institutions and experiences of marginalisation produce imposter feelings and thus what imposter feelings can tell us about the structure of UK HE.

The boundaries of institutional belonging are exposed by feeling, and being identified as being, out of place. As Puwar (2004: 8) argues, spaces (like universities) are highly racialised, gendered and classed with certain types of bodies disrupting 'the somatic norm' and being seen as 'space invaders'. Often 'space invaders' in UK HE experience racial microaggressions – 'brief everyday interactions that send denigrating messages to people of colour' (Rollock, 2012: 517) – which produce cumulative exclusionary experiences for marginalised groups. Racial microaggressions are inextricably linked to the structure of UK HE, and thus 'tell us something about the wider context', namely the maintenance of whiteness as neutrality in the academy (Johnson and Joseph-Salisbury, 2018: 147–149). It is important to name and problematise these invisibilised structures of whiteness, masculinity and upper-/middle-classness to disrupt them, rather than trying to assimilate or assume that representation alone will shift structures (Puwar, 2004: 153–155). Thus, it is important to go beyond a focus on access to university, by examining how universities are experienced by marginalised students. For example, Arday et al. (2022) highlight the exclusionary nature of curricula, pedagogical practices, the persistence of the awarding gap and the importance of appropriate mental health provision, specifically for ethnically minoritised students and staff.

As we are discussing marginality across multiple groups, it is important to state that different forms of marginality are not interchangeable; intersecting marginalities and personal biography manifest in complex ways for individual students. It is important to name the specificity of certain experiences, such as misogynoir, 'anti-Black racist misogyny

that Black women experience' (Bailey and Trudy, 2018: 762), and manifestations of privilege within discussions of marginalised groups. For instance, in our interviews, many interviewees narrated 'overcoming' their imposter feelings, especially more privileged students, similar to Friedman et al.'s (2021: 725) more privileged interviewees who narrated overcoming or challenging imposter feelings. We began to think of this as a *girl bossing imposter syndrome* narrative, whereby individual empowerment narratives 'both acknowledge the impact of sexism and simultaneously implied this could be overcome through hard work and changing one's mindset, without consideration of intersecting forms of marginalisation. 'Girl boss' is a colloquial term that celebrates the success of individual women in business as a win for gender equality. It has been critiqued for offering a white, corporate imagining of feminism (Mull, 2020). Similar to the idea of 'girl power', girl bossing imposter syndrome involves a 'postfeminist sensibility' (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020: 5) in which women 'makeover' their mindset, drawing on more neoliberal conceptualisations of personal responsibility and individual 'choice' (Baker, 2010). Such overcoming narratives individualise achievement and failure, implying that individuals can 'choose' their response to imposter feelings, constructing those who are unable to overcome as deficient, similar to Loveday's (2016) discussion about classed and gendered shame.

Girl bossing imposter syndrome draws on similar tropes around inspiration as the 'supercrip' concept – an inspirational representation of a disabled person who is seen to overcome their disability through perseverance (Schalk, 2016). Such inspiring narratives often imply that disabled people should be able to 'overcome' their disability – despite this not necessarily being possible or desirable – or feel like a failure for not living up to the inspiring or heroic 'supercrip' (Silva and Howe, 2012). Individual overcoming narratives, including around imposter feelings, can be disempowering as they downplay structural barriers and ignore the influence of privilege, such as wealth or whiteness, in facilitating achievements. Thus, the dynamics of marginality and privilege are important in conceptualising how imposter feelings are experienced and narrated in UK HE.

Ahmed's (2012, 2014, 2017) work frames our understanding of how differently marginalised students experience imposter feelings in response to the exclusionary atmosphere of UK HE. Ahmed's (2014: 10) sociality of emotions model provides an understanding of imposter feelings beyond inside-out or outside-in models of emotions, whereby 'emotions are not "in" either the individual or the social, but produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow all kinds of objects to be delineated'. Emotions are produced and 'stick' to certain objects or bodies, but the emotion production processes are often erased (Ahmed, 2014: 11). This results in varying levels of 'diversity work': 'the work we do when we do not quite inhabit the norms of an institution' (Ahmed, 2017: 91). Diversity work is required to just exist or get by in institutions not made by or for staff and students of colour, capturing the time- and energy-consuming nature of being marginalised in UK HE, 'whether or not they aim to modify that system' (Ahmed, 2017: 114). Even apolitical marginalised students who are not involved in 'equality, diversity, and inclusion' work end up doing diversity work. In stark contrast, privilege is conceptualised as 'an energy-saving device. Less effort is required to be or to do' (Ahmed, 2017: 125–126). In short, marginality produces energy-consuming work and privilege saves energy, leading to an uneven distribution of existence and persistence work in universities.

From this, we develop the concept of *imposter work*, the emotional work done to weather feelings of being a fraud despite one's achievements, in order to survive and thrive in exclusionary spaces. Imposter work can be done by anyone who experiences imposter feelings, not just marginalised students. However, imposter work is not distributed equally. Marginalised students' imposter feelings are reinforced by exclusionary institutions and societal oppression, and it becomes part of their diversity work, whereas for more privileged students, their energy-saving privilege helps to withstand imposter feelings. For marginalised students, imposter feelings are a particularly potent form of diversity work because it involves an internalisation of marginalisation, which is seen as an individual problem to be dealt with through neoliberal well-being discourses. Imposter work allows us to highlight the production process of imposter feelings, how they are produced in response to structural issues, which leads to the uneven distribution of this work related to marginalisation.

Methodology

We analysed 27 from a larger study of 110 in-depth semi-structured interviews with undergraduate STEMM students from underrepresented groups, conducted between June and November 2020. Our focus on underrepresented STEMM students was connected to the funding institution's equality, diversity and inclusion policy; 'underrepresented' was used as an umbrella term for a wide array of students who experience marginalisation on the basis of their gender and/or sexuality, disability, class, 'race' and/or ethnicity, alongside considering the nature of some context-specific experiences of being in the minority at UK universities, namely first-generation, mature students (aged 21 or older upon matriculation), and international students (including EU students). In this article, we use the term marginalised and focus on gender, sexuality, disability, class and 'race' to acknowledge that imposter feelings are not just about numerical levels of representation and to connect these discussions to larger debates about the felt experience of marginality in UK HE.

Our study focused on how being underrepresented affected students' identities and career aspirations at two pre-1992 elite UK universities. We chose these universities due to ease of access through researcher connections, allowing us to recruit many students in a short space of time via email using a demographic survey. This generated much interest, so we capped the numbers of interviewees from some disciplines to ensure a spread across STEMM subjects and to ensure inclusion of all underrepresented groups covered by our study. Students self-identified as belonging to one or more underrepresented groups. The demographics of the 27 interviewees in this article are: 22 women, five men; 18 racially or ethnically minoritised students; nine disabled students (four ticked disabled in survey, five did not, but mentioned mental health in the interview); 13 working-class students; 14 first-generation students; no mature students; one gay man and five bisexual students; and according to fee status: 23 UK, two International, two EU students. Additionally, three students discussed being from racialised religious minority groups. Students came from across undergraduate year groups, alongside one recent graduate, and across disciplines: 13 biology; eight physics; three medicine; one engineering; one maths; one computer science. We include this broad demographic overview

to provide general information about the breadth of experiences covered and as a shorthand attempt to situate interviewees. Throughout the analysis we list students' identities to briefly explain their social location. While this is a flattening of the dynamics of structural positioning, it is balance between providing sufficient background to situate participants within the word count of this article and maintaining anonymity. The focus on marginalised groups meant that some constellations of identity and experience might render interviewees identifiable; accordingly, we are sometimes deliberately vague in our descriptions and all names are pseudonyms.

Due to COVID-19, interviews were conducted online via video call by the four authors, averaging 50 minutes in length. They were audio-recorded, transcribed for thematic coding and supplemented by researcher reflections written after each interview. None of the authors had pre-existing relationships with any interviewees but we were attentive to the power dynamic as academic staff interviewing students, alongside the complexity of our different structural positionings and identities vis-à-vis interviewees. For context, Murray is a queer disabled white Irish woman from a middle-class background, Chiu is a straight East Asian woman from a middle-class background, Wong is a straight British East Asian man from a working-class background and Horsburgh is a straight, white British woman with dyslexia, from a lower-middle-class background. Some aspects of our identities might have been known or 'visible' to participants and sometimes we 'outed' ourselves as belonging to marginalised groups when it felt appropriate; these shared (or not) positions may have affected students' trust and willingness to discuss more sensitive topics. Drawing on feminist interviewing practices (Hesse-Biber, 2007), we took an active listening approach, signalling an openness to believing students' experiences on their own terms, using the language they used and responding with emotion that 'took sides' against discriminatory experiences discussed, rather than performing a flat pseudo-neutral interviewer affect.

Interview questions covered: educational background prior to university, general experiences at university, including a focus on the transition to university, sense of belonging, development of disciplinary and professional STEMM identities, and how being 'underrepresented' affected their student experience. While none of our questions focused on imposter syndrome, 10 interviewees named their experiences as imposter syndrome, and we coded 17 additional interviews as discussing imposter feelings using the coding description:

> Explicit discussions of imposter syndrome or students discussing their lack of confidence in their ability, particularly if they are worried that they shouldn't be at university [in general], at that [specific] university, on their course. Worries about not being able to do well or that they might be 'found out' for not being good enough. This seems to be particularly connected to being underrepresented.

Imposter feelings manifested among some interviewees as concern that they had been accepted to university by mistake or as a 'token' for their marginalised group. Initially we coded 45 interviews but removed 18 interviews that focused more on lack of belonging or concern about lack of achievement, to focus on the specific imposter dynamic of feeling like a fraud *despite* one's achievements. Our coding process was not meant to

provide a definitive number of students 'with imposter syndrome', but rather to systematically identify students self-describing as having imposter syndrome or students who described persistently feeling like a fraud despite their achievements. We analysed these 27 interviews by re-reading the transcripts and associated researcher reflections, identifying three analytical themes: (1) the situated and relational nature of imposter feelings, largely during the transition to university and assessment periods; (2) the disproportionate imposter work done by marginalised students; (3) individualised narratives of overcoming imposter syndrome, largely expressed by more privileged students.

Times and Spaces of Imposter Feelings

Two key moments that produced imposter feelings in our interviewees were: the start of first year, when students were adjusting to university; and around assessments, when students often actively compared themselves, and were being compared, to other students. This highlighted the situated and relational nature of imposter feelings, rather than functioning as a general 'syndrome' in a person.

Many interviewees described feeling overwhelmed at the start of university, including a painful identity shift for some, from being 'top of the class' at school to 'average' or 'below average' at university. Lakshani, a British-Asian woman from a working-class background, discussed such an identity shift: 'I was not getting as high grades as I was used to getting. And that was probably something that did kind of almost alarm me.' Lakshani's feelings did not persist after she settled into university as her grades improved and she sought support from her friends alongside university mental health support and mentoring. However, other students' imposter feelings lingered due to negative interactions with peers and competitive atmospheres on their degree programmes. Prisha, a British-Asian working-class, first-generation student, described an early experience with a lab partner: '[he] was explaining something to someone else and when I asked him to repeat it, he was like, "oh, you wouldn't understand it". And that completely shattered my confidence when it came to labs.' Such interactions with peers are gendered, raced and classed, whereby the assumption that Prisha will 'not understand' at such an early stage of her degree is loaded. Despite occupying the 'same' marginal positioning as Lakshani in relation to gender, race and class, Prisha's degree programme was much less diverse and had a reputation for being extremely competitive. Regardless of the intention of Prisha's lab partner, his comments exacerbated pre-existing worries during the transition to university, particularly around lack of representation and stereotypes about 'people like her' on the course. Thus, levels of underrepresentedness on certain STEMM courses and microaggressions produce chillier environments for marginalised students.

Many students experienced a flare up of imposter feelings around exam time, as highlighted by Chapman (2017). Sarah – a white British middle-class first-generation woman – described questioning her place at university around exam time. Similar to Lakshani, Sarah was able to discuss this with her friends and her very supportive personal tutor, which helped her navigate her worries, particularly as a first-generation student. Sarah's ability to weather imposter feelings around assessment was remarkably different from another student on her course, David – a white gay British man from a working-class background – who described persistent imposter feelings:

> I feel like in the lead up to exams I keep getting into like 'what's the point, I'm not as good as everyone else, I'm never going to do as well as everyone else'. And then as soon as exams are over, I realise, oh I did quite well actually and I start working hard again for the next term.

This exhausting internal narrative occurred throughout David's degree, despite achieving consistent first-class marks. His imposter feelings were explicitly connected to class, whereby he described feeling like he was 'lesser than most other people' that he studied with and 'a bit too thick to be here' because of his accent and his state school background. He compared his classed experience at university to being gay, saying that his sexuality affected his sense of fitting-in in society in general but not at university. The elite university context activated his classed alienation vis-à-vis privileged peers and institutional assumptions that constructed him as being deficient (Loveday, 2016), specifically around disciplinary background knowledge expectations from academics, which presumed educationally privileged schooling and/or enough time outside class to 'catch up'.

Student experiences of imposter feelings were highly situated and relational, coming up in response to transitionary moments and specific groups or individuals. While many students were able to manage their imposter feelings with support from friends and university staff, the feelings lingered for others who were hyper-underrepresented, especially after experiencing microaggressions from peers.

Doing Imposter Work

Our interviewees described the difficult emotional work of managing their imposter feelings, specifically: working hard to 'catch up' with more privileged peers, emotionally negotiating marginality and performing white middle-class norms to 'institutionally pass' (Ahmed, 2017: 127). We argue that this constitutes imposter work, an unevenly distributed form of emotional work, drawing on Ahmed's (2012, 2017) concept of diversity work. These different forms of imposter work involved marginalised students making themselves comprehensible to the university and more privileged peers and staff with an underlying hum of feeling like a fraud.

Some students tried to 'catch up' with more privileged students, such as Chao-Xing, a British-Asian bisexual working-class first-generation woman. She explicitly named her experience as imposter syndrome, describing feeling left out: 'Because I didn't go to a boarding school, I didn't play tennis or hockey with any of the other girls that've come from boarding schools. Our families didn't go skiing in chalets in Switzerland.' Her discussion of exclusion and imposter feelings focused on class: 'I never felt like being a woman or being bisexual was really a problem . . . I think being first generation and coming from a working-class background, those things have affected me more than being a woman.' She described more privileged friends' families facilitating internships, jobs and networking opportunities and her own decision to 'catch up' by focusing her energy on pursuing a career in finance, particularly after receiving 'below average' marks in early exams. Despite focusing on class and saying of her ethnicity, 'I don't think that's affected my journey at university at all' she did experience racist stereotypes from

friends. She downplayed these as not that important, because: 'I was able to prove them wrong and we were able to become friends anyway.' Alongside Chao-Xing's 'catching up' imposter work, her downplaying of racial stereotypes as 'not racism' becomes a form of diversity work; managing her own emotional responses to racism, similar to coping strategies of emotional detachment and desensitisation discussed in Wong et al. (2022).

However, for our Black interviewees, who discussed racism more than most other racially minoritised interviewees, their experiences of racism were harder to dismiss. This highlights the specific impact of anti-Blackness and hyper-underrepresentation at university. Beatrice, a middle-class British woman, was the only Black student on her degree programme, provoking fears on her first day that she had been accepted as a 'token': 'I immediately thought, maybe they just accepted me because they needed to accept someone from an ethnic minority. A Black person. I still think that to this day.' This belief was reinforced by extremely negative experiences throughout her degree related to both staff and students, including racist stereotypes used by a lecturer in class and one particular incident of receiving a harsh mark from two white men academics during a research presentation. This low mark was hard for Beatrice and her supervisor to understand based on the work, leading her to (unsuccessfully) challenge the low mark. This experience of misogynoir was hard to 'prove' within institutional processes, with her bumping up against 'walls' of disbelief: 'You point to structures; they say it is in your head. What you describe as material is dismissed as mental' (Ahmed, 2017: 6). While Beatrice had the (perhaps classed) confidence to challenge her low mark, this experience confirmed her lingering fears of being a 'token' Black student on her degree and reinforced her imposter feelings.

For Black working-class students, such as Michael, anti-Blackness and classism are navigated together. Michael, a Black British working-class man, described imposter feelings during his transition from school to university in response to his privileged peers and being hyper-underrepresented on his course. This initially constrained his ambition and engagement with his degree, as he tried to avoid disappointment by lowering his expectations: 'I was just here to pass.' However, these attempts to 'just pass' were also about institutionally 'passing' (Ahmed, 2017: 127–128) in the highly raced and classed environment. The hyper-underrepresentation of Black working-class men on his degree programme meant that Michael engaged in extensive 'code-switching' (Rollock, 2014: 448): he dressed more 'professionally', changing his accent and language to fit into the white middle-class norms of his course because: 'I didn't want to be judged or . . . known as that stereotypical Black guy.' Michael's adopted persona is imposter work; trying to fit in at an elite university, anticipating and responding to stereotype threat (Edwards, 2019). While Michael's imposter feelings reduced over time, this required huge amounts of imposter work to 'institutionally pass', telling us something about the whiteness and middle-classness of the space (Puwar, 2004).

Some students explicitly connected their imposter feelings to marginalisation. Selma – a white British working-class woman – described experiencing imposter syndrome throughout her degree despite achieving a first-class degree; she was so surprised about the result that she double-checked the grade breakdown for fear of a mistake. At the end of the interview, she reflected on the connections between imposter syndrome and class:

> I never really thought about how . . . being working class and first generation might have compounded into that [imposter syndrome]. I thought it was more like a question of my intelligence and my IQ, but it is actually also a social thing.

Despite Selma having the language of imposter syndrome to describe her experience, its popular usage did not carry a classed analysis, instead imposter syndrome was imagined as being 'in' her individually. This demonstrates the importance of reconceptualising imposter feelings as relational and in response to marginality rather than as self-deficiency (Breeze, 2018; Loveday, 2016). We argue that by conceptualising imposter feelings as work, we make explicit the uneven division of emotional work by marginalised students in response to exclusionary structures.

Girl Bossing Imposter Syndrome: The Myth of Individual Overcoming

An individualistic understanding of imposter syndrome was evident in our interviews with some more privileged women confidently naming their experiences as imposter syndrome and narrating 'overcoming' it. This fits with the tendency for famous women to publicly discuss experiences of imposter syndrome alongside academic imposter confessions and individual advice on how to manage or overcome it. This individualises imposter feelings and sidelines the impact of structural inequalities (Breeze et al., 2022; Tulshyan and Burey, 2021). We describe the 'overcoming' narratives of some of our interviewees as 'girl bossing' imposter syndrome; a narrative that overemphasises individual responses to structural problems, leaning into neoliberal ideas of individual choice, personal responsibility and an emphasis on changing one's mindset in response to inequalities (Baker, 2010; Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Loveday, 2018).

Three interviewees – all white middle-class women – discussed fleeting discomfort during their transitions to university, naming this as imposter syndrome and describing how they individually overcame it. Chiara, a British student in biology, described her insecurity upon arriving at university, but framed it as something to get over. When asked about whether or not she fitted in at university, she replied:

> I'd say, yes. Nothing has made me feel really out of place . . . I suppose, it's just everyone there is very smart and sometimes you think, oh, that kind of imposter syndrome . . . I think a lot of people probably feel that and you have to just get over it basically.

Similarly, Zosia, a European student in biology, discussed her transition to university as 'exciting' and Nicole, a British student in maths, discussed her degree programme as 'a worthy challenge' despite finding it difficult and describing being underrepresented on her degree as a woman. These three women positively narrated imposter feelings, which were brief transitionary experiences. While they acknowledged the role of marginality in their experiences, their imposter feelings were largely seen as an individual challenge. This was extremely different to the imposter feelings of many less privileged students who described persistent alienation and lack of self-belief but did not explicitly name their experiences as imposter syndrome. Even for our white middle-class women interviewees in physics and engineering – which have a much higher gender imbalance than biology – they articulated intense imposter feelings: persistent lack of self-confidence and questioning their presence at university, which was explicitly gendered and related to their level of marginalisation.

While such stories can seem positive and empowering, providing heroic role models to others experiencing similar feelings, it conflates very different experiences of imposter

feelings eliding the intersecting marginalities at play. As the supercrip concept highlights, overcoming narratives underplay how privilege can facilitate such achievements (Schalk, 2016: 80–81), and can put pressure on people to 'overcome' even if this is not necessary or possible, or risk being seen as a failure (Silva and Howe, 2012: 189). It utilises individualising liberal or corporate feminist narratives, or 'postfeminist sensibilities' (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020: 5), whereby one can individually overcome marginality through positive narration or changing one's mindset, erasing the structural elements and flattening complex intersectional dynamics (Breeze et al., 2022), including the 'energy-saving' nature of privilege (Ahmed, 2017: 125–126).

The flipside of the privileged women's overcoming narratives was multiple marginalised men interviewees seeing imposter feelings as personal failures, despite acknowledging how class, race and disability affected their education. These are two versions of the same myth of individual overcoming, which individualise imposter feelings as if they rely on hard work and determination rather than unevenly distributed imposter work. This was very present in the narratives of two interviewees: Greg – a working-class, white British, first-generation disabled student and Peter – a British-Asian man from a working-class background.

Greg described experiencing imposter syndrome during his first-year exams and subsequently overworking in his second year which led to a serious deterioration of his mental health. In response, he sought professional support and spoke to friends, ultimately developing a more balanced approach to studying. However, throughout this he described doing a lot of extra administrative work to find and access support services and ensure his disability-related access needs were met. Despite this additional disability-related administrative work and his acknowledgement of how class had affected his studies, he found it difficult to acknowledge the impact of marginality on his imposter feelings:

> it's not something I've ever really wanted to analyse . . . I think a lot of the imposter syndrome has come about from my own ability, or my own perceived ability, to do the course . . . it's a personal failure, I've never blamed it on anything else.

Similarly, Peter found it difficult to acknowledge the impact of class on his own experience, with a contradictory narrative:

> when I compare myself to my cohort, I feel like a lot of people, they are smarter than me. But I feel like a lot of that is down to them being able to get into grammar schools or private schools and whatnot. A lot of it's down to the individual rather than the school that they went to.

This demonstrates the pull of overcoming narratives, as if the individual can succeed over marginality if one works hard enough. This individualisation of failure as personal responsibility (Loveday, 2018) is particularly potent alongside imposter feelings, which make it hard to believe one's own successes.

Contrastingly, some student narratives focused on collective or institutional forms of support, demonstrating a non-individualist way of conceptualising imposter work. Many Black students discussed the importance of their university's Afro-Caribbean Society as

a crucial space to connect with other Black students who were also hyper-underrepresented on their courses. Such alternative spaces of belonging and peer support helped survive imposter feelings, particularly when paired with appropriate institutional support (e.g. mentoring, counselling and staff pastoral support) and alternative spaces of achievement (e.g. work experiences, lab groups and student societies' activities). Many students discussed relational coping strategies, such as Lakshani and David who both had very supportive friendship groups with whom they could be emotionally vulnerable. Some students fostered oppositional 'outsider' identities, such as Katherine – a middle-class mixed heritage woman – who described her friendship group as 'outsiders' in comparison to their peers, positively claiming an oppositional identity. This is an example of what Taylor and Breeze (2020) call an 'imposter positionality' – the explicit claiming of an outsider within position – that allowed Katherine and her friends to distance themselves from certain metrics of achievement within their elite university. Such collective approaches to navigating imposter feelings that acknowledge marginality and the structural elements of imposter feelings help to disrupt the myth of individual overcoming. While some more privileged students may be able to girl boss imposter syndrome, it is important to situate these narratives within the relative privilege of these students' experiences, and the additional imposter work required of multiply marginalised students. Thus, our conceptualisation of an uneven distribution of imposter work helps to understand why overcoming might be possible for some but not others, situating their experiences within intersecting forms of marginality and specific contexts.

Collective Responses to Imposter Feelings

The popularity of the term imposter syndrome, especially in higher education contexts, indicates that it has struck a nerve, helping many to name their experiences and feel less alone. However, many understandings of imposter syndrome are 'depoliticised, individualised-universalised framings' (Breeze et al., 2022: 616), which conceptualise it as an individual condition to overcome or manage, and something that 'everyone' experiences. This glosses over a spectrum of experiences and sidelines the role of marginality in producing imposter feelings. Using critical sociological understandings of imposter syndrome (Addison et al., 2022; Breeze, 2018; Edwards, 2019; Taylor and Breeze, 2020) and the sociality of emotions (Ahmed, 2012, 2014, 2017), we argue that imposter feelings occur in situated and relational ways in response to people, spaces and moments. Imposter feelings are not 'in' people; they are produced by the dynamic between people and social contexts. In our interviews we found that imposter feelings were particularly prevalent during the transition to university and around exams, an experience that is heightened and lingers for those who are marginalised. This is particularly so if students are hyper-underrepresented on their degree programme or at elite universities in general, such as students who are Black and/or working class. This requires more focus on how imposter feelings are produced by exclusionary environments; as Puwar (2004) and Johnson and Joseph-Salisbury (2018) argue, 'space invaders' and their emotive experiences in certain spaces, such as experiencing racial microaggressions at university, tell us something about the structure itself.

To this end, we argue that imposter feelings are a form of unevenly distributed emotional work - imposter work - drawing on Ahmed's (2017) concept of 'diversity work'. Imposter work helps to acknowledge the time and energy-consuming nature of imposter feelings, particularly when they are tied up in multiple intersecting forms of marginality. Our reconceptualisation of imposter syndrome as unevenly distributed imposter work is an attempt to disrupt individualising approaches to understanding imposter feelings and what to do about them. Rather than feeding into prominent 'overcoming' narratives, we want to reconsider it as a structural problem to be institutionally and collectively addressed. As Breeze et al. (2022: 627) ask, '*what can we do together* or perhaps *what alternatives can we imagine and enact*' (emphasis in original) namely we must imagine collective alternatives to individualising advice-giving approaches to dealing with imposterism. We offer some initial reflections on these questions, considering both shorter-term responses to support current students and longer-term transformative efforts.

Our analysis highlighted the intensity of imposter feelings around the transition to university and exams, indicating a need for better student support during these moments. For example, facilitating more cohort building on degree programmes, providing clear induction materials and replacing high-stakes exams with formative assessment at the start of university. For students whose imposter feelings persist beyond these moments, universities could provide better pastoral support through personal tutors, teaching staff and services such as student counselling and disability support. This means ensuring such staff have sufficient time, support and training to support students from different backgrounds. Many UK HE staff are constrained in their ability to provide appropriate support to students by structural issues of overwork and stress (Gill and Donaghue, 2016; Loveday, 2021) and lack of understanding of how marginality impacts mental health (Arday et al., 2022).

Many of our interviewees discussed the importance of peer support, specifically collective and emotionally open spaces such as: friendship groups where experiences of discrimination and marginality could be discussed even if those friends were differently marginalised; and student societies with inclusive cultures and/or which focused on marginalised groups, such as the Afro-Caribbean Society. For hyper-underrepresented students, like Black students, cross-university student societies or cross-university initiatives like Black Students Talk (Stoll et al., 2021) provided important spaces to find peer support with other Black students who understood the specificity of anti-Blackness. While talking about imposter feelings can be powerful – normalising perceived failure or difficult emotions, and encouraging students to seek support as an important part of the learning process (Wong and Chiu, 2019) – there is a limit to just talking about it. Breeze et al. (2022) warn that 'public confessions' of imposter feelings pose a greater risk for marginalised peoples and can reinscribe the idea that it is an individual problem. Additionally, as Wong et al. (2022) highlight around student experiences of racism, the university is not always a safe space to discuss issues of marginality. Thus, while peer support and open discussion of imposter feelings can be extremely helpful to students, it is not a panacea and should not be treated as a cheaper alternative to staff support or addressing structural inequalities.

We discuss these student coping strategies to acknowledge their successful survival strategies – emotionally open peer support that acknowledges the impact of marginality on imposter feelings – and suggest that universities value student societies, marginalised student networks and the importance of time and space to socialise on and off campus.

Additionally, institutional acknowledgement of imposter feelings through workshops, talks and resources can make students feel less alone in their feelings. However, we argue these must shift from individual deficit models – 'I have not done enough to overcome imposter syndrome' – to an imposter work model – 'more imposter work is required for me to survive, never mind thrive, in this exclusionary environment'. An imposter work model can help disrupt individualising, self-blame narratives by highlighting the social cause of imposter feelings and their connection to marginality, as happened in some of our interviews. As discussed earlier, Selma realised in her interview that imposter feelings were not due to a lack of intelligence as she had originally thought, but instead were connected to her class background, which seemed to provide her with relief. Such short-term disruption to individualising conceptualisations of imposter syndrome is meaningful to current students' survival in UK HE. However, this will not stop imposter feelings happening in the first place and puts the responsibility on students to manage these feelings rather than changing the cause of them.

To address the cause of imposter feelings requires fundamental transformation of UK HE. As ongoing discussions by anti-racist, decolonial and abolitionist scholars highlight, the university is fundamentally exclusionary and reforming it or increasing the representation of marginalised people is not enough (Bhambra et al., 2018; Phipps and McDonnell, 2021). As Johnson and Joseph-Salisbury (2018: 156) argue: 'Our goal is not to find a way to belong here. We aim to find a way to thrive beyond here', which involves finding 'tools to survive and thrive, or to leave and reject these spaces as they currently exist'.

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