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The Lived Experiences of Imposter Syndrome Among Women of Color Professors in Higher Education

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Walden University

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Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

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Adrianna M. Hooker

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Walden University
2025

Abstract

The Lived Experiences of Imposter Syndrome Among Women of Color Professors

in Higher Education

by

Adrianna M. Hooker

MA, Jackson State University, 2021

BS, Ashford University, 2018

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Psychology

Walden University

November 2025

Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the unique challenges faced by women of color professors in higher education, who often experience imposter syndrome due to systemic barriers and underrepresentation. The purpose of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of how these professors experienced and made meaning of imposter syndrome in academic settings. The central research question examined the meaning of imposter syndrome among women of color professors in higher education. This study was grounded in intersectionality and self-determination theory, which provided frameworks for understanding how multiple identities influenced feelings of inadequacy and professional identity. Participants included 12 women of color who had taught for at least 1 year in higher education. Data were collected through semistructured interviews and analyzed using Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method, which involved identifying and transforming meaning units to derive an overarching structure of the experience. Findings revealed that participants experienced compounded discrimination, invisibility, and perfectionistic pressures that intensified imposter feelings despite high levels of achievement. The results highlight the need for institutional support systems that recognize and address these challenges. Ultimately, the study contributes to positive social change by informing policies and practices that foster inclusive academic environments, improve faculty retention, and empower marginalized voices within higher education.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my late stepfather, Anthony Patrick. You were so excited about me pursuing my PhD and would tell everyone about my journey. I wish you were here to see this achievement. I know you would be proud, and I always carry your love and support in my heart.

To my children, Ava and Kaylee, this work is for you. May you always know that your voice matters, your brilliance belongs in every room, and your dreams are possible.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

The imposter phenomenon, also known as imposter syndrome (IS), is a psychological experience where individuals feel like intellectual frauds despite evidence of their competence and success (Bernard et al., 2017; Stone et al., 2018). This phenomenon is particularly prevalent among high-achieving individuals, including women and racial/ethnic minorities in academia (Stone et al., 2018). While the imposter phenomenon has been studied among various populations, the experiences of women of color (WOC) professors in higher education remain understudied. Key contributions of this research include increased awareness to foster empathy and inclusivity, policy changes addressing systemic barriers, and inclusive practices that empower WOC faculty (Corneille et al., 2019). The research aimed to inform institutional practices and educate on how to promote greater equity in academia. This study was crucial due to the underrepresentation and systemic barriers faced by WOC in higher education.

This chapter begins with an overview of the study on IS among WOC professors in higher education. It highlights the significance and social implications of this understudied phenomenon, reviews existing literature, and identifies a gap in the specific experiences of WOC in academia. Additionally, I discuss the current relevance and importance of this issue within the discipline. The chapter outlines the research question, introduces the study's theoretical framework, and describes the nature of the study, including the rationale for a qualitative approach and a summary of the methodology. Key concepts, assumptions, scope, delimitations, limitations, and the study's significance

are also addressed. The chapter concludes with a summary of the main points and a transition to Chapter 2.

Background

The existing literature on the study topic presented diverse perspectives and findings. Several studies have emphasized the significance of understanding contextual factors, such as socioeconomic status, cultural background, and technological access, in influencing educational practices (Ahmed et al., 2020; Feenstra et al., 2020). Existing research suggested that IS was common among high-achieving individuals, including WOC in academia. However, there was a lack of qualitative studies exploring the specific experiences of WOC faculty members. Previous studies examined the phenomenon broadly, often overlooking the complexities of intersectionality that shaped these individuals' experiences (Bravata et al., 2019; Stone et al., 2018). Emerging research indicated that WOC in academia faced unique challenges, including heavier workloads, lack of mentorship, and exclusion from professional networks, which could contribute to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. Furthermore, the intersections of race and gender created additional barriers for WOC faculty, who had to navigate the White and male-dominated spaces of academia (Davis et al., 2021).

Addressing the gap in research on the experiences of WOC professors dealing with IS was crucial. Recent studies demonstrated that IS significantly impacted mental health, career progression, and well-being, especially among high-achieving women and racial/ethnic minorities in academia (Chakraverty, 2022; Fields & Cunningham-Williams, 2021; McGee et al., 2023). However, many studies failed to focus explicitly on WOC

faculty, leaving their specific challenges unexamined. This oversight was significant as WOC professors navigated complex racial and gender biases that intensified feelings of inadequacy. The study aimed to provide insights to inform inclusive policies and practices in higher education by investigating IS within this demographic. Such contributions are increasingly relevant today, where diversity and inclusion are paramount for fostering equitable environments. Addressing this gap may enhance academic discourse and promote a more inclusive, supportive atmosphere for WOC faculty members (Parkman, 2016).

While existing literature acknowledges the prevalence of IS in academic environments and the challenges faced by Black women, there is a scarcity of in-depth qualitative studies that focus exclusively on the experiences of WOC faculty members dealing with IS (Priddie et al., 2022). This study examined the meaning of IS among WOC professors in higher education. It sought to explore how IS shaped their professional lives, well-being, and sense of belonging within the academic community. The research was necessary to better understand how IS affected WOC in academia, especially in the context of systemic challenges and cultural disconnects they faced.

Problem Statement

The research problem addressed in this study involved exploring IS experiences among WOC serving as professors in higher education institutions. IS has been a persistent issue for WOC in academia, with studies highlighting their unique challenges resulting from the intersections of race and gender (Cokley et al., 2017; Fields & Cunningham-Williams, 2021). These challenges could lead to lower self-confidence,

burnout, and attrition, hindering the recruitment and retention of diverse faculty. Recent research demonstrated that IS significantly impacted high-achieving individuals, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds (Everett et al., 2016). WOC faced unique academic challenges such as systemic barriers and a lack of representation, which exacerbated feelings of inadequacy. The study examined the experiences of WOC professors in dealing with IS to inform inclusive policies and practices in higher education (Ahmed et al., 2020; Bernard et al., 2020; Huecker et al., 2023).

The research aimed to fill a critical gap in the qualitative understanding of IS experiences among WOC serving as professors in higher education. Recent studies continually highlighted the prevalence of IS among high-achieving individuals, especially from marginalized backgrounds (Bernard et al., 2017; Stone et al., 2018). The study examined the unique challenges faced by WOC professors, including cultural and institutional factors that contribute to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. By examining this phenomenon in depth, I sought to generate valuable insights to support inclusive practices and policies supporting WOC in academia. This focus on a specific demographic underscored the research's relevance and urgency, aligning with ongoing discussions about diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education (Priddie et al., 2022).

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative research aimed to explore the meaning of IS among WOC professors in higher education. It focused on understanding the unique challenges this demographic faces in academia, such as underrepresentation, systemic barriers, and

compounded discrimination. The findings were intended to inform institutional practices and promote equity through empathy, inclusivity, and policy changes that empower WOC faculty.

Research Question

What is the meaning of imposter syndrome among women of color professors in higher education?

Conceptual Framework for the Study

This study examined the meaning of IS among WOC professors in higher education. IS is characterized by a persistent sense of self-doubt and the fear of being exposed as a fraud despite evidence of success and ability. This psychological phenomenon is particularly prevalent among high-achieving individuals and marginalized groups who confront systemic obstacles and intersectional discrimination (Huecker et al., 2023).

The framework incorporated two main theoretical approaches: self-determination theory (SDT), developed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan (1985), and intersectionality theory, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. SDT posits that individuals have three basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—which influence motivation and well-being. It was essential to understand how WOC navigated their academic environments and how unmet needs contributed to feelings of inadequacy (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). Intersectionality theory emphasizes how overlapping social identities, particularly race and gender, shape experiences of discrimination and privilege (Nadal et al., 2021). The interaction between these theories illuminated the complex

challenges faced by WOC, highlighting both internal struggles and external systemic barriers.

The central research question was the following: What is the meaning of imposter syndrome among women of color professors in higher education? It explored how systemic barriers and personal psychological challenges intersect. The qualitative methodology facilitated an in-depth investigation through semistructured interviews, allowing participants to share their narratives and experiences related to IS (Corneille et al., 2019). This study employed semistructured interviews to gather rich, descriptive data about participants' experiences with IS. The data analysis employed Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method, allowing me to derive meaning from the participants' narratives while maintaining fidelity to their lived experiences (Sinfield et al., 2023). This approach highlighted the importance of understanding the participants' perspectives within the broader context of systemic barriers and individual psychological factors, thereby providing a thorough understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Naeem et al., 2023). The conceptual framework integrated SDT and intersectionality theory to offer a holistic understanding of the experiences of WOC professors with IS. It bridged the internal psychological challenges with the external systemic barriers encountered by this demographic in higher education, establishing the foundation for a qualitative examination of their lived experiences (Kelly & Winkle-Wagner, 2017). The framework's connection to the study approach, research question, and instrument development provided deeper insights into how the intersection of race and gender

formed the experiences of WOC professors with IS, informing policies and practices in higher education to promote equity and support.

Nature of the Study

This study employed a descriptive phenomenological research design to explore the meaning of IS among WOC professors in higher education. This methodology was suited for the study as it aimed to uncover the essential, universal structures and meanings of IS as perceived by the participants. According to Giorgi (2009), descriptive phenomenology focuses on the detailed description of experiences, offering insights into how individuals comprehend and make sense of their realities. This method proved beneficial for understanding complex emotional experiences, especially within marginalized groups, as supported by Giorgi (2012), who emphasized the value of this approach in revealing the nuanced experiences of underrepresented populations in academia. The key steps in the analysis process were as follows: (a) thoroughly reading the participants' descriptions to understand the lived experiences; (b) adopting a phenomenological psychological reduction viewpoint to examine the experiences as presented to awareness, without assuming their actual existence; (c) dividing the lengthy descriptions into meaning units based on differences in meaning; (d) transforming the meanings in psychologically sensitive ways to convey the psychological meaning and integrate with other descriptions; and (e) determining the general essential structure of the experience by reviewing the transformed meanings. This structured approach aimed to deeply analyze the participants' experiences.

The key concept was IS among WOC professors in higher education. IS—the feeling of being an academic or professional fraud despite evident success and competence (Edwards, 2019). It was notably prominent in marginalized groups, where systemic barriers and cultural factors might amplify these feelings. Understanding this phenomenon was crucial for addressing the unique challenges WOC faced in academia, as it could impact their professional development and overall well-being (Jackson et al., 2022).

Data were gathered through in-depth, semistructured interviews with a purposively selected sample of WOC faculty who had at least 1 year of academic experience and had experienced IS. The sampling approach ensured that a diverse range of perspectives were represented. Interviews were conducted via video conferencing (Zoom), providing the participant with a safe and comfortable setting to facilitate open discussion. Interviews were recorded to ensure accurate transcription and analysis. Audio recordings were transcribed using manual hand coding to facilitate efficient data structuring and analysis. This methodological framework aligned with the descriptive phenomenological research design, prioritizing individuals' lived experiences to understand complex social phenomena.

Definitions

BIPOC: Black people, indigenous people, and other people of color, groups that make up the major minority populations in the United States compared to the 60.1% non-Hispanic White majority (Lin & Kennette, 2022).

Imposter syndrome (IS): Imposter syndrome affects high-achieving individuals, including men and women from diverse backgrounds, who struggle to internalize their successes and often feel like frauds (Bravata et al., 2019).

Women of color (WOC): This term refers to female individuals from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds, encompassing a diverse range of identities, including African American, Latina, Asian American, and Indigenous women (Ahmed et al., 2020).

Intersectionality: Intersectionality suggests that identities like gender, race, and sexuality interact and reflect larger social systems of oppression and privilege, such as sexism, racism, and heteronormativity (Kelly et al., 2021).

Systemic barriers: Unfair discrimination against marginalized groups, including racial, ethnic, gender, sexual, disability, and religious minorities (Braveman et al., 2022).

Microaggressions: Everyday insults, dismissals, and invalidations experienced by people from minority or marginalized groups (Lui & Quezada, 2019).

Assumptions

This study assumed several key points crucial for understanding the experiences of WOC professors in higher education with IS. It was assumed that IS was a significant and common psychological experience among WOC professors. Additionally, systemic barriers, including institutional racism and sexism, played a crucial role in shaping their experiences. Lastly, WOC were underrepresented in higher education, and the intersection of race and gender uniquely influenced their experiences.

Assuming IS was a significant and common issue among WOC professors, I explored its psychological impact (Bravata et al., 2019). This assumption was essential

for understanding how IS affected their sense of competence and professional identity, laying the groundwork to examine its prevalence and consequences within this specific group (Barbour & Lammers, 2015). The assumption that systemic barriers such as institutional racism and sexism shaped the experiences of WOC professors was vital for understanding the broader context in which IS manifested. This perspective was crucial to analyzing how these barriers exacerbated feelings of inadequacy and isolation, highlighting the critical need for structural changes in higher education. By assuming that WOC were underrepresented and uniquely affected by the intersection of race and gender, the study focused on the compounded discrimination they faced. This assumption highlighted the importance of intersectionality in understanding their experiences, facilitating a thorough examination of unique challenges and the development of targeted strategies for support and empowerment (Jackson et al., 2022). These assumptions were crucial to the study's objectives, as they facilitated a comprehensive examination of the lived experiences of WOC professors and informed recommendations for inclusive and equitable institutional practices.

Scope and Delimitations

This study explored the meaning of IS among WOC professors in higher education. These professors faced unique challenges due to discrimination based on both their race and gender. The study aimed to understand how these feelings, known as imposter syndrome, altered their academic experiences, well-being, and sense of belonging. By focusing on the real-life experiences of WOC professors, the research addressed an important gap in the current literature, which had not fully explored the

complex intersection of race and gender faced by this specific group (Kelly & Winkle-Wagner, 2017).

Boundaries of the Study

The study focused on WOC professors currently employed in higher education institutions. Participants were required to identify as WOC, hold a faculty position, and have acknowledged experience of IS in their academic careers. This selection ensured that the experiences explored were relevant to understanding IS within the context of WOC in academia.

The study excluded individuals who did not hold a faculty position, had less than 1 year of academic experience, or did not recognize or disclose their IS experiences. These boundaries ensured that the findings reflected a specific group with shared experiences and challenges related to IS.

Regarding theoretical frameworks, the study drew on SDT, emphasizing intrinsic motivation and psychological needs, and intersectionality theory, examining how overlapping identities contribute to unique experiences of discrimination and privilege. However, the research did not investigate other potentially relevant frameworks, such as social identity theory or critical race theory, which could have provided additional insights into the systemic barriers faced by this population (Bauer et al., 2021).

Potential Transferability

The findings from this study on WOC professors may also apply to other marginalized groups and professional settings. The personal experiences described in this

research could resonate with WOC in various fields and other high-achieving individuals facing self-doubt and systemic barriers.

Furthermore, the implications of the findings could inform practices across different educational contexts, providing a framework to better support WOC faculty and other marginalized groups in academic and professional environments. However, transferability depends on contextual factors, such as organizational culture, systemic biases, and representation of diversity. While the findings offer valuable insights, they should be considered within the specific contexts in which they are applied (Ahmed et al., 2020).

Limitations

The specific experiences of WOC professors vary widely based on their institutional environments, geographic locations, and disciplinary contexts. The reliance on qualitative methods, particularly semistructured interviews, introduced variability in the data collected, which could have affected the consistency and dependability of the study. The proposed sample size of 12–15 participants, while aiming for data saturation, may still be considered small for drawing broad conclusions about the experiences of WOC professors in higher education (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). My background as a WOC in higher education may have introduced biases or preconceived notions that influenced data collection and analysis, potentially impacting the objectivity of the research. Additionally, other potential limitations included retrospective bias and social desirability bias. Retrospective bias may have impacted participants' recollections of their experiences with IS, as their current emotional states could have influenced how they

remembered past events (Urban et al., 2018). Moreover, social desirability bias may have led participants to present their experiences more favorably, potentially underreporting career challenges (Latkin et al., 2017).

Acknowledging these biases was crucial for comprehending the limitations of the findings and interpreting them with appropriate caution. To address these limitations, the study employed measures such as thoroughly documenting context, engaging in peer debriefing, and maintaining reflexivity (Ahmed et al., 2020). Additionally, the study addressed potential biases, including selection bias and response bias, through clear communication, diverse recruitment strategies, and ensuring participant anonymity.

Significance

The study may contribute to the discipline by refining or challenging existing theories, addressing literature gaps, using innovative methodologies, and integrating interdisciplinary insights. Potential contributions to practice and policy include identifying best practices, informing decision-making, and proposing implementation frameworks. The study may also have positive social implications by empowering marginalized groups, facilitating community initiatives, raising awareness, and promoting sustainability and resilience (Lansing et al., 2023).

Summary

This chapter focused on the experiences of IS among WOC professors in higher education. It outlined the significance of studying this phenomenon, which affects high-achieving individuals who felt inadequate despite their successes. The study addressed the lack of qualitative research on WOC professors' unique challenges, including

systemic barriers and discrimination. It explored the lived experiences of WOC professors with IS, using a theoretical framework that combined SDT and intersectionality theory. The study employed a descriptive phenomenological research design to capture the participants' experiences. Finally, I discussed the significance of the study in advancing knowledge, influencing practice and policy, and contributing to positive social change.

Chapter 2 examines the literature search strategy, detailing the databases, search terms, and process used. The conceptual framework is identified and defined, synthesizing primary sources. Finally, an exhaustive literature review is presented, addressing relevant studies and methodologies.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Over the years, the phenomenon of imposter syndrome (IS) has emerged as a critical concern within higher education, particularly affecting women of color (WOC) who strive for academic and professional success. Despite their increasing representation in academic institutions, these individuals often confronted unique challenges that hindered their confidence and self-perception (Khan et al., 2024). Studies indicated that WOC frequently experienced feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt, negatively impacting their career trajectories (Cokley et al., 2017; Parkman, 2016). The intersectionality of race and gender compounded these challenges, creating barriers that were not only systemic but also deeply personal (Pogrebna et al., 2024).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and illuminate the meaning of IS among WOC professors in higher education. Through an examination of their lived experiences, this research aimed to uncover the unique challenges they encountered, including systemic barriers such as racial and gender discrimination, which were often compounded by a lack of representation in academic environments (Pogrebna et al., 2024). Understanding these dynamics was crucial for addressing the barriers hindering WOC's success in academia. The social problem that prompted this investigation was the pervasive issue of IS experienced by WOC in higher education. Characterized by persistent feelings of inadequacy and the fear of being exposed as a fraud, IS creates significant obstacles to the academic and professional success of these individuals (Parkman, 2016). Studies showed that WOC often faced not only the pressures of

academic excellence but also the weight of societal stereotypes and biases, which could exacerbate feelings of isolation and self-criticism (Cokley et al., 2017). Despite their qualifications and achievements, many WOC struggled with a persistent fear of being exposed as a fraud, which undermined their professional growth and well-being (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991).

Research on IS revealed that it was a prevalent issue affecting individuals across various demographics. Still, WOC in higher education faced unique challenges that exacerbated their experiences. A systematic review by Bravata et al. (2019) highlighted the widespread impact of IS, noting that those from marginalized backgrounds reported higher levels of this phenomenon. Furthermore, Ahmed et al. (2020) and Chance (2021) explored how systemic racism and microaggressions contributed to the experiences of WOC, leading to a compounded sense of being an ‘imposter’ in academic settings.

While there had been substantial research on the experiences of women in leadership roles within higher education, the specific context of IS among WOC remained underexplored. The existing literature primarily focused on broader gender dynamics or the experiences of women in general, often overlooking the intricate challenges WOC faced (Freeman et al., 2019; Tarbuton, 2019). The current literature has established a strong foundation for understanding the significant impact of IS on WOC in academia. Research indicated that WOC often experienced higher rates of IS compared to their counterparts, due to systemic issues such as microaggressions, underrepresentation, and the pressure to perform in predominantly White academic settings (Anderson, 2023). Studies showed that the experiences of WOC were further complicated by

intersectionality, where overlapping identities of race and gender created unique challenges that could exacerbate feelings of inadequacy (Cokley et al., 2017; Crenshaw, 1991; Parkman, 2016).

Furthermore, the literature highlighted the importance of institutional support and inclusive practices in mitigating the effects of IS, underscoring the need for research that amplifies the voices and experiences of WOC faculty members (Chakraverty, 2022; Dancy & Brown, 2011; Priddie et al., 2022). Despite the growing acknowledgment of IS in academic settings, a scarcity of qualitative studies remained that specifically focused on the experiences of WOC professors. Much of the existing research has examined the phenomenon broadly across various demographics or has been limited to quantitative analyses. This gap indicated a critical need for in-depth qualitative explorations that provided richer insights into the lived experiences of WOC in academia, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the implications of IS within higher education. Overall, the current literature established the relevance of investigating IS among WOC, highlighting the significant barriers they faced and the need for targeted interventions to mitigate these challenges in higher education.

Chapter 2 began with a restatement of the problem and purpose, outlining the core issue of IS among WOC professors in higher education. This section articulated the study's aim to explore the lived experiences of these individuals, emphasizing the systemic barriers that contributed to feelings of inadequacy. Following this, a concise synopsis of the current literature was provided, focusing on the unique challenges faced

by WOC in academia. This literature overview highlighted the limitations of existing research, particularly the lack of qualitative insights into their personal experiences.

The literature search strategy detailed the methodologies employed in identifying relevant studies, including the databases utilized and key search terms. The conceptual framework was then introduced, defining and elaborating on the key concepts central to the study: self-determination theory (SDT) and intersectionality theory. This framework explained how these theories informed the understanding of IS and the experiences of WOC professors, highlighting their relevance in addressing systemic barriers and motivations.

The literature review related to these key concepts provided an exhaustive examination of existing research. This section evaluated various approaches to the problem and synthesized findings from current studies, emphasizing how these theories applied to the experiences of WOC in academia. Finally, the chapter concluded with a summary that encapsulated the major themes identified in the literature review and discussed the study's contributions to the existing body of knowledge.

Literature Search Strategy

The peer-reviewed articles used in this study were retrieved from various databases, including Walden University's APA PsycInfo, APA PsycTests, ResearchGate, SAGE Journals, Taylor and Francis, Google Scholar, PubMed, and ProQuest. Keywords used for the literature review include *imposter syndrome*, *imposter phenomenon*, *women of color*, *higher education*, *minority women*, *self-doubt*, *academic achievement*, *gender disparities*, *racial disparities*, *faculty of color*, *self-determination*, and *intersectionality*.

Conceptual Framework

The framework for this study comprised two theoretical approaches: self-determination theory (SDT), developed by Richard Ryan and Edward Deci (1985), and intersectionality theory, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. Intersectionality theory and self-determination theory were employed to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of WOC in higher education. SDT emphasized the importance of intrinsic motivation, autonomy, and psychological needs in fostering personal growth and well-being. This framework was relevant for understanding how WOC navigated their academic journeys and the role that self-motivation played in overcoming challenges such as IS. Additionally, intersectionality theory enabled an exploration of how overlapping social identities, including race, gender, and class, interact to create unique experiences of discrimination and privilege. By integrating SDT and intersectionality theory, this study attempted to provide a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of WOC professors, capturing the complex interplay between psychological factors and systemic barriers, and informing strategies to enhance their success and well-being in academia.

Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory (SDT) was developed by Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan in 1985. SDT is a study of people's innate psychological needs and growth tendencies, which form the foundation for their self-motivation and personality integration, as well as the environments that support these constructive processes (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Although the theory initially focused on intrinsic motivation, it eventually

expanded to encompass models of well-being, goal content, relationship quality, vitality, and depletion, among other topics. This study concentrated on the concepts of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. SDT has had a significant influence on psychology and education. Key writings emphasize that satisfying the psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness leads to enhanced motivation and psychological health.

Autonomy is the need to feel in control of one's actions and decisions. A lack of autonomy in academia may arise from systemic biases that restrict decision-making and self-expression. *Competence* is the need to feel effective and capable. This need may be undermined for WOC professors due to negative stereotypes and microaggressions that challenge their professional identity. *Relatedness* is the need to feel connected and valued within a community. The absence of supportive networks or representation can lead to feelings of isolation, exacerbating IS. Research has shown that when these needs are not met, individuals may experience detrimental effects, including anxiety and self-doubt (Clance & Imes, 1978).

Motivation

Motivation involves energy, direction, persistence, and equifinality — all aspects of activation and intention. The issue of motivation has been central to psychology since it plays a role in biological, cognitive, and social development (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Motivation is highly valued in the real world because it produces results: motivation drives action. Though motivation is frequently viewed as a single concept, even a cursory examination reveals that people are motivated to act under various circumstances, each with unique experiences and outcomes. Individuals may be motivated by strong external

pressure or their own values for the activity (Ryan & Deci, 2000). People whose motivation is authentic tend to be more interested, excited, and confident than those whose motivation is merely externally controlled.

Intrinsic Motivation. Perhaps no single phenomenon better captures the positive aspects of human nature than intrinsic motivation—the innate propensity to seek novelty and challenges, to grow and challenge oneself, to explore and learn (Ryan & Deci, 2000). According to SDT, the most self-determined type of motivation is intrinsic motivation—conducting actions because of motivations related to the innate enjoyment and interest in the behavior (Ibáñez de Aldecoa et al., 2022). Intrinsic motivation is a predictor of improved learning, performance, creativity, optimal development, and psychological wellness (Domenico & Ryan, 2017). Intrinsically driven individuals engage in behavior because they find it exciting and rewarding

Extrinsic Motivation. Extrinsically motivated people participate in an activity to achieve a valuable goal or avoid punishment, among other instrumentally separable consequences. As a result, SDT has long identified four primary subtypes of extrinsic motivation. External regulation is a type of motivation usually perceived as controlled and nonautonomous. It deals with behaviors that are motivated by rewards and punishments imposed by outside sources. Introjected regulation—partially internalized extrinsic motivation, which governs behavior through internal rewards such as self-esteem for achievement and avoidance of feelings of guilt, shame, or anxiety for failure. When introjected regulation occurs in academic settings, it often manifests as ego-

involvement, where self-worth is contingent upon performance, resulting in ‘internally controlled’ regulation (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Intersectionality Theory

Intersectionality theory was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. This theory emerged from feminist and critical race theories, emphasizing the interconnectedness of various social identities, such as race, gender, class, and sexual orientation, and how these intersections shape individual experiences of oppression and privilege. Crenshaw originally developed this framework to highlight the specific challenges faced by Black women, who often encounter discrimination that is not fully addressed by either feminist or anti-racist movements (Crenshaw, 1991). By emphasizing the interconnected nature of social identities, intersectionality theory provides a lens through which to examine the systemic inequalities that affect marginalized groups, making it relevant for analyzing the experiences of WOC in higher education.

Race, in the context of intersectionality theory, plays a crucial role in shaping the experiences and challenges faced by WOC in academia. Racial identity can significantly influence how educational institutions perceive, treat, and support individuals. WOC often encounter microaggressions, stereotypes, and systemic biases that can hinder their academic progression and professional development (Adedeji et al., 2022). These experiences are compounded by the historical and social contexts that have marginalized their identities, creating barriers to access and equity in higher education (Heffernan, 2023). By examining race through the lens of intersectionality, it becomes evident that

the experiences of WOC are not merely a function of their racial identity but are also shaped by the intersections of other identities, including gender.

Gender is another critical component of intersectionality theory, as it intersects with race to create unique experiences of inequality for WOC. Gender norms and expectations can influence how women navigate academic environments, often placing additional pressures on them to conform to traditional roles while simultaneously facing challenges related to their racial identity (Godsil et al., 2016). WOC may confront both sexism and racism, leading to compounded experiences of discrimination that can manifest as IS, lower self-esteem, and feelings of isolation. Understanding gender within the framework of intersectionality allows for a more comprehensive analysis of how systemic inequalities impact WOC. It underscores the importance of addressing both racial and gender-based challenges to foster an inclusive and equitable academic environment.

Application to Study

Previous research demonstrated the application of SDT in educational contexts, highlighting how fulfilling psychological needs could enhance motivation and academic performance. According to studies, WOC often experienced barriers to autonomy and relatedness due to systemic bias, which could lead to feelings of isolation and imposter syndrome (Fields & Cunningham-Williams, 2021; Heslop et al., 2023). In this study, SDT's framework provided the components of autonomy, relatedness, and competence to understand how these factors affected WOC and how they used these factors to overcome IS. The research aimed to explore how WOC navigated their psychological needs and

uncover the strategies they used to overcome IS. By understanding the dynamics of SDT in relation to the academic experiences of WOC, the study sought to provide insights that could foster an environment promoting motivation and enhancing academic performance among marginalized groups (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Intersectionality theory played a crucial role in this study by illustrating how overlapping identities (race and gender) influenced these experiences (Crenshaw, 1991; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The intersection of these identities caused distinct challenges that intensified the barriers to autonomy and relatedness outlined in SDT. By employing an intersectional approach, this research explored more deeply how systemic biases differentially impacted WOC based on their specific identities. Acknowledging these complexities facilitated a more comprehensive understanding of the psychological and systemic factors involved (Williams, 2021).

By employing these theories, this study aimed to provide a deeper understanding of the systemic and psychological aspects that influence WOC in academia, thereby guiding the development of initiatives to improve their well-being and success. This approach addressed the existing research gaps and emphasized the value of institutional support and inclusive practices (Priddie et al., 2022).

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

The research on imposter syndrome (IS) revealed a complex interaction between identity, structural obstacles, and psychological effects, especially concerning WOC in higher education. Numerous studies employing both qualitative and quantitative approaches established a solid foundation for understanding the impacts of IS on well-

being and academic outcomes (Clark et al., 2022; Craddock et al., 2011). For example, Clance and Imes (1978) first conceptualized the imposter phenomenon, highlighting the psychological distress experienced by high-achieving women who doubted their accomplishments. Subsequent research expanded on this foundation, utilizing diverse methodologies, including surveys, interviews, and focus groups, to capture the nuanced experiences of marginalized groups (Bravata et al., 2019; Chance, 2021).

IS was studied from various perspectives. Some research focused on the psychological constructs associated with imposter feelings, such as self-doubt and anxiety, while others examined the sociocultural factors that exacerbated these feelings among WOC. For instance, Ahmed et al. (2020) demonstrated that systemic racism and lack of representation significantly influenced the prevalence of IS among BIPOC individuals. The strengths of these studies lie in their ability to highlight the intersections of race and gender, providing a comprehensive understanding of how these elements combine to create unique challenges. However, a notable weakness was the often-limited qualitative exploration of these individuals' lived experiences, which could oversimplify the complex issues involved (Jackson et al., 2022).

Understanding Imposter Syndrome

According to Clance and Imes (1978), it was discovered that extremely successful women who held PhDs in their various specialties, were well-liked in their careers, and were acknowledged for their superior academic performance, lacked an internal sense of accomplishment. Imposter syndrome (IS) is a behavioral health condition characterized by doubts about one's intellect, skills, or accomplishments. These high-achieving

individuals are unable to internalize this success, which in turn causes them to experience pervasive feelings of self-doubt, anxiety, depression, and apprehension that they will be exposed as a fraud in their work despite verifiable and objective evidence of their success (Huecker et al., 2023).

According to Huecker et al. (2023), there is a phenomenon known as the imposter cycle, which consists of five interrelated characteristics: *perfectionism*, *super-heroism*, *atychiphobia* (fear of failure), *denial of competence and capability*, and *achievemephobia* (fear of success). Clance and Imes (1978) initially defined *perfectionism* as the 'need to be the best.' This category encompasses a range of hyper-competitive and perfectionist behaviors that arise when individuals with IS self-impose standards and goals that are nearly impossible to achieve. These unachievable standards perpetuate a negative feedback loop for those who feel pressured to 'be the best'. Work martyrdom (sacrificing one's own interests for a fictitious 'greater good'), overgeneralizing errors that are interpreted as a 'lack of ability,' and excessively critical, unhelpful self-feedback are all issues that can be made worse by this feature of IS. These actions may contribute to IS's super-heroism (Huecker et al., 2023; Thomas & Bigatti, 2020). *Super-heroism*, a frequently mentioned aspect of the imposter cycle, is inherently linked to the desire to be the best. In IS, it frequently manifests as a propensity to over-prepare tasks so that one appears more than capable of finishing them. Over-preparation is the primary manifestation of this IS component, and it is secondary to the previously stated unachievable self-imposed standards. The extra workload has a negative impact on mental health (Huecker et al., 2023; Sukhera et al., 2022). A fear of failure arises when

faced with achievement-related tasks, whether imposed internally or externally. If someone with IS fails or performs worse than a peer on a given task, they are exposed as an imposter, which causes them to experience anxiety and fear of embarrassment and humiliation (Giel et al., 2020). *Denial of competence and capability*, which is closely related to perfectionism, causes people to minimize their natural abilities, experience, knowledge, and skills. Even when there is proof that a person completed a task without these factors, there is a tendency to internalize failure and attribute success to external influences or chance (Huecker et al., 2023). *Achievemephobia* explains how people internalize failures as a positive feedback loop and how they struggle to internalize or acknowledge their accomplishments because doing so could raise expectations or add to their already heavy workload. These traits do not fully encompass all manifestations of IS. Individuals can experience imposter syndrome despite not exhibiting all or any of the recognized characteristics associated with this phenomenon (Anjum & Godil, 2019).

Imposter Syndrome and Higher Education

Imposter syndrome is a significant issue in higher education, particularly among WOC. (Brems et al., 2016) investigated faculty members' experiences with IS. The authors discovered that their availability to students, student advising, and teaching evaluations were all impacted by imposter syndrome. Overall, instructor ratings were significantly higher when instructors exhibited few signs of IS; this pattern was also observed in advising (Chakraverty, 2022; Parkman, 2016). Teachers who assessed themselves as highly idealistic and goal-directed scored far higher on several teaching assessment measures. They received higher ratings for being more beneficial to

struggling students and successful in igniting students' passion and drive to learn. These professors were also rated higher overall for the general caliber of their courses and their teaching abilities (Feenstra et al., 2020).

Faculty of color are underrepresented across institutional types compared to White faculty. Researchers and scholars have noted the abysmal number of faculty of color and their disparate professional experiences. In 2007, only 17% of professors in American higher education were people of color (Viernes Turner et al., 2008). Faculty members of color play a crucial role in preparing students for various social roles and objectives through their instruction of course material and other interactions. Additionally, teachers are observed to process their personal experiences when instructing others and engaging with students and colleagues (Dancy & Brown, 2011). In the classroom and other educational contexts, faculty members may encounter microaggressions from students who challenge their authority and knowledge due to their gender or race (Feenstra et al., 2020). According to research, Black women are more likely than their White counterparts to suffer from unconscious biases and racial microaggressions (Kasztelnik, 2023).

Higher Education Challenges

Data from the Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health revealed that Latino/individuals represent a mere 6.0% of all instructional faculty and 6.1% of all tenured faculty at schools and programs of public health (Abraído-Lanza et al., 2022). While Latinas report greater work-life balance compared to their Latino counterparts, there is a shortage of research investigating Latinas' caregiving responsibilities for aging

parents or disabled family members. Furthermore, Latina faculty face an added burden from the ‘push and pull’ of their roles as exemplars and mentors to students of color, while simultaneously navigating the pressures of their roles as mothers and spouses (Denson et al., 2017). The small numbers of African American, Latino/a, and Native American students and faculty in higher education institutions may contribute to the perception that they do not ‘belong’ (Abraído-Lanza et al., 2022). Multiple studies emphasize the importance of a strong sense of belonging in academic settings (Corneille et al., 2019; Lin & Kennette, 2022). In their review of gender and ethnicity in 15 leading social science and public health universities, Khan et al. (2024) identified broad structural factors that create barriers to diversity in schools of public health. Importantly, they discovered that gender and ethnicity intersect, posing challenges for WOC as they strive to advance in the academic ranks. They concluded that the marginalization, prejudice, and discrimination faced by ethnic minority women account for these findings, as evidenced by lower pay for similar positions, temporary contracts, and other practices that hinder the recruitment and promotion of ethnic minority women (Khan et al., 2024).

Challenges Faced by Women of Color Professors

WOC faculty members frequently suffer from IS, believing they are less capable than their peers and afraid of being exposed for this perceived shortcoming (Fields & Cunningham-Williams, 2021). These shortcomings are compounded by challenges in maintaining authenticity due to institutional and internal racism. They frequently encounter racial and gender stereotypes, such as being perceived as loud or argumentative, which are deeply embedded in societal norms and can affect their

professional interactions and self-perception (Banaji et al., 2021; Fields & Cunningham-Williams, 2021). Many African Americans take part in code-switching, modifying their speech and behaviors to fit into predominantly White environments, which can be exhausting and reinforce feelings of inadequacy (Crumb et al., 2023). *Code-switching*, alternating between two or more languages, dialects, or speech registers within the same conversation or utterance (Crumb et al., 2023). When individuals from diverse racial and/or cultural backgrounds are present, code-switching occurs when they modify their vernacular and other modes of self-expression to blend in more (Dunn, 2019). WOC are frequently underrepresented in academia, leading to feelings of isolation and hyper-visibility. This underrepresentation may make it more difficult for them to succeed in educational environments (Fields & Cunningham-Williams, 2021). They encounter prejudice, and their research is undervalued, especially when it focuses on African American communities, which are sometimes viewed as less deserving of attention. The institutional culture frequently puts the interests of White males first, erecting structural obstacles that place WOC in lower positions and hinder their career trajectories (Fields & Cunningham-Williams, 2021).

Imposter Syndrome in Women of Color Professors

WOC are particularly susceptible to imposter syndrome. Racial identity and Afrocentricity significantly contribute to predicting imposter syndrome among WOC (Stone et al., 2018). Several factors have been found to shape the development of imposter syndrome in WOC, including adjusting to new roles, attaining a remarkably high level of education compared to one's family background, having a negative self-

perception, and being an outlier or atypical within one's environment (Ahmed et al., 2020). Imposter syndrome arises not merely from the disconnect between the idealized image of an academic and one's self-perception, but also from the routine interactions with faculty, students, and administrators that communicate a lack of belonging or competence (Abdelaal, 2020). WOC may internalize racism due to personal or learned experiences, leading to feelings of IS and challenges with authenticity within predominantly White academic environments.

The imposter phenomenon arises from a disconnect between external validation and internal self-perception, which can undermine the confidence and success of WOC in academia (Naser et al., 2022). Approximately 70% of the general population experiences feelings of imposterism regarding their professional achievements throughout their careers (Walker & Saklofske, 2023). Despite earning their degrees, receiving academic honors, achieving high scores on standardized tests, receiving praise, and gaining professional recognition from colleagues and respected authorities, these women do not experience an internal sense of success. Women who experience imposter syndrome struggle with internalizing their accomplishments, often exhibiting symptoms such as anxiety, self-doubt, depression, and frustration when the targets they had set for themselves proved unattainable (Simon, 2021).

Imposter syndrome may be more pronounced among early-career academics in fields that prioritize brilliance, as they may feel greater uncertainty about their capabilities and face heightened pressure to demonstrate their abilities. While concerns about one's competence can be widespread among early-career academics across different

settings and disciplines, the environment of brilliance-oriented fields is likely to amplify these concerns (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Female academics in fields that prioritize brilliance reported elevated levels of the imposter phenomenon compared to those in disciplines with less emphasis on brilliance as essential for achievement. Imposter concerns may be heightened in brilliance-focused disciplines among academics from social groups that are not culturally associated with intellectual giftedness. As women are subjected to such stereotypes, they may be particularly inclined to question whether they possess the requisite capabilities to thrive in domains that value brilliance and to be concerned about how their peers and colleagues perceive their abilities (Muradoglu et al., 2021).

Fake It Until You Make It

The concept of 'Fake It Until You Make It' (FITUM) is often discussed in relation to IS, particularly among marginalized groups, including WOC in academia. Cummings (2024) examined how this phrase embodied both a coping mechanism and a potential pitfall for individuals struggling with feelings of inadequacy. Cummings (2024) discussed the potential drawbacks of the FITUM mindset, which pushes people to appear competent and confident even when they may not feel that way. When people use this tactic, they can overcome challenging circumstances, such as networking events or academic presentations, where self-doubt might otherwise impair their performance. Individuals with a confident exterior may be more willing to take risks and seize opportunities, which can further their career development (Zanchetta et al., 2020).

Cummings (2024) also highlights the dangers of consistently adopting the FITUM way of thinking. This strategy can cause dissonance between the external image that many WOC present and their inner feelings of inadequacy. The pressure to ‘fake’ confidence can make people feel like they are living a lie and worry about being ‘found out’ as dishonest, which can worsen IS symptoms. Because people are constantly pressured to appear competent, this tension can lead to significant emotional strain and burnout (Ehinger & Bales, 2023).

Exploring the FITUM mentality in the context of IS highlights how difficult it can be to deal with feelings of inadequacy, especially for WOC who work in academia (Cummings, 2024). Projecting confidence can help one advance professionally, but it is essential to balance this with genuine self-support and acceptance. Academic institutions can lessen the effects of IS and enable WOC to succeed in their careers by creating environments that value authenticity and validation (Chakraverty, 2022).

Women of Color Feel Invisible Within Their Institutions

WOC frequently experience a deep sense of invisibility throughout their academic careers in higher education (Wilkins-Yel et al., 2018). In terms of the systemic oppression that WOC face and their hypervisibility, they are portrayed in an abnormally stereotyped way and are invisible (Kasztelnik, 2023). Due to their overrepresentation in health disparities and lack of advancement in the workplace, WOC experience either systemic invisibility or problematic visibility, including sexist discrimination (Kasztelnik, 2023). Due to misrepresentation in the classroom, many WOC experience mental health problems or exclusion simply because they are a woman of color. WOC often feel

pressured to downplay their identities or diminish their presence to conform to the dominant culture and avoid drawing attention to themselves (Showunmi, 2023).

Systemic Barriers and Underrepresentation

WOC frequently encounter systemic barriers that perpetuate their invisibility within academic institutions. Despite increasing diversity efforts, WOC remain significantly underrepresented in faculty positions (Freeman et al., 2019). This lack of representation limits their visibility and stifles opportunities for mentorship and networking, which are essential for professional growth and development (Ahmed et al., 2020). Consequently, the absence of role models and advocates can exacerbate feelings of isolation and invisibility among WOC faculty. Despite this ongoing stigma, WOC still must deal with the changing gender and racism dynamics in their lives (Kasztelnik, 2023). In traditionally White, male-dominated professions, for instance, female and racial minority workers frequently face differential perceptions and treatment (e.g., they are less frequently consulted for guidance or included in work-related discussions (Feenstra et al., 2020).

According to research, despite evidence that supports their success or value, many women, and people of color (WOC in particular) experience what has been called the imposter phenomenon, or the belief that they are unintelligent or insufficient (Nadal et al., 2021). In higher education, men have traditionally held positions with greater authority, influence, and pay, despite women's increasing achievement in these roles. In 2000, men accounted for 21% of teaching positions (Schaeffer, 2024). Researchers have linked the challenges faced by WOC in their pursuit of positions in higher education to

the outdated framework that many institutions adhere to (Bynum & Stordy, 2017; West et al., 2022).

Members of historically oppressed groups encounter numerous negative signals about their identity groups through institutional oppression and interpersonal interactions. As a result, people may develop negative thoughts about their own social identity groups and engage in various self-destructive or self-hating behaviors against themselves or others within the same group (Nadal et al., 2021). Although Black female leaders often take greater risks to combat intersectional invisibility than their White counterparts, their goals remain unfulfilled, and issues remain unresolved generation after generation, leaving Black female leaders to focus on the same problems for decades or even centuries (Pogrebna et al., 2024).

Cultural Disconnect and Misalignment

The cultural disconnect between predominantly White institutions and the diverse backgrounds of WOC can exacerbate their feelings of invisibility (Godsil et al., 2016). Institutional cultures that prioritize Eurocentric values and norms may inadvertently alienate WOC, leading to a lack of belonging and acceptance (Showunmi, 2023). This misalignment can hinder their engagement and participation in academic life, further entrenching their sense of invisibility. There has always been a distinct separation between women of different racial backgrounds in the United States (Wong et al., 2022). Although individual women have undoubtedly and courageously attempted to overcome racial and ethnic divides in the service of shared objectives, there is less evidence of a

broad-based, long-term movement to resolve the inconsistencies of a patriarchal power structure (Bhattacharyya & Berdahl, 2023; Wong et al., 2022).

Both Black and White women experience a sense of alienation and uninhabitability due to the White male culture. Black women, however, can feel especially alienated; according to one study, they had fewer resources—like network connections—than White women to assist them in integrating into the company (Showunmi, 2023). They were also less likely to have role models who mirrored their own gender and color, and they felt more pressure to do better than their (mostly White) male colleagues (Godsil et al., 2016). Furthermore, although both Black men and Black women indeed face the stigma of being ‘incompetent and unqualified,’ Black men have had greater luck advancing to senior executive positions, underscoring the negative effects of having intersecting identities as female and a racial minority (Godsil et al., 2016).

Intersectionality and Compounding Experiences

The intersectionality of race and gender plays a critical role in shaping the experiences of WOC in academia (Crenshaw, 1989). WOC often face compounded discrimination, navigating both racial and gender biases that can render them invisible within their institutions. This intersectional lens highlights how their experiences cannot be fully understood through a singular lens of race or gender but rather through the interplay of multiple identities that influence their academic reality (Tarbutton, 2019). Racism and sexism are two of the many forms of oppression that WOC experience. WOC encounter more obstacles than White women in their pursuit of career advancement and

financial security because of these discriminatory structures. The intersectionality of race and gender that African American women encounter in the workplace leads to a system of disparities based on racial and gender biases (Bynum & Stordy, 2017).

According to the theory of intersectionality, systems of inequality interact to co-create people's daily lives by frequently bestowing privilege or oppression depending on where they fall within hierarchical power structures. Kimberlé Crenshaw popularized the word 'intersectionality' in academia to emphasize how Black women were disproportionately vulnerable to legal bias, violence, discrimination, and intra-community invisibility in the U.S. context (Crenshaw, 1991; Jackson et al., 2022). The experiences of WOC are often the result of intersecting sexism and racism, and they are often underrepresented in the discourses of antiracism and feminism. WOC are marginalized in both discourses because of their intersecting identities as women and people of color inside discourses that are designed to address one or the other (Jackson et al., 2022).

The Role of Institutional Support

Resources such as institutional support networks are essential to address the invisible status of WOC in higher education. Studies show that inclusive practices and supportive networks can reduce feelings of isolation and increase the visibility of WOC faculty members (Priddie et al., 2022). Initiatives aimed at fostering diversity, equity, and inclusion can create environments where WOC feel valued and recognized for their contributions, thereby counteracting the effects of invisibility. Professional development opportunities for WOC foster a sense of community by facilitating discussions of shared interests and experiences. Recent research has explored WOC's distinct orientations and

strategies to make meaning of and justify their inclusion in the academic community (Ward, 2021). Professional development opportunities that create peer support systems and camaraderie help WOC persist in academia. A lack of community contributes to faculty leaving institutions (Behnken et al., 2023). WOC frequently lack the social capital, mentorship, and opportunities necessary for career mobility. Along with a lack of support, WOC encounter racism, sexism, and prejudice throughout their career trajectory (Bynum & Stordy, 2017).

Mentorship has been highlighted as an essential part of professional advancement for WOC who hold positions of power and influence. A crucial component of WOC's access to social mobility in their professional careers is mentoring. WOC can benefit from mentoring relationships with other leaders with dominant and nondominant identities to increase retention and advancement (Bynum & Stordy, 2017). In addition to being crucial for WOC's social mobility and growth, mentoring also empowers WOC, fosters trust, and gives them comfort in knowing they will have assistance from someone who has gone through similar struggles. Since mentoring offers support, acceptance, and camaraderie, it may be the most important factor in helping WOC achieve business success (Bynum & Stordy, 2017).

Impact of Isolation on Support Networks

The underrepresentation of minority populations in higher education contributes to the isolation experienced by WOC. This isolation diminishes their capacity to develop supportive networks that could aid them in addressing the stressors stemming from biases and discrimination (Rodrigues et al., 2021). Experiences of social isolation can lead to the

internalization of invalidating messages that fail to acknowledge the existence of incivility and harassment. As a result of their frequent isolation, the lack of social support networks leaves WOC with few avenues to contextualize their experiences of racial and gender-based challenges (Rodrigues et al., 2021). Social support enables women to place their experiences within a broader context, allowing them to recognize and identify the underlying cultural patterns of sexism and racism.

WOC professors frequently encounter heightened feelings of isolation, which can impede their capacity to establish supportive networks essential for navigating bias and discrimination (Woods et al., 2024). This isolation is exacerbated by limited mentorship opportunities and the perceived diminished competence stemming from stereotypes. These factors can have a cumulative adverse impact on their productivity and career advancement. Establishing dedicated spaces on campus for faculty of color can help alleviate these feelings of isolation by facilitating networking opportunities and mentorship, which are crucial for forming meaningful connections and support systems (Lin & Kennette, 2022).

Invisible Imposter Syndrome: Identity of Women of Color in Institutions

The phrase ‘Invisible Imposter Syndrome’ captures the distinct challenges WOC face when attempting to navigate higher education. Fundamentally, intersectionality exposes power structures and the various ways in which power operates (Jackson et al., 2022). The idea that social categories are monolithic is challenged by intersectionality, which examines how multiple systems of domination intersect to influence the daily lived experiences of individuals and social groups (Jackson et al., 2022). Multiple marginalized

identities may be subjected to ‘more’ oppression and discrimination than people with fewer marginalized identities, and nonprototypical identities typically occupy subordinate group positions within dominant institutions. In mainstream institutional contexts, structural disadvantages and cultural mismatches result in feelings of invisibility or hypervisibility among various minoritized groups (Jackson et al., 2022).

Impact of Negative Workplace Experiences

WOC frequently lack institutional recognition and access to academic networks. At all levels, WOC faculty members have reported negative work experiences, but non-tenure-track academics have had the most adverse experiences. Colleagues' attempts at support or mentoring can sometimes further marginalize and gaslight WOC by downplaying their experiences (Lin & Kennette, 2022; Rodrigues et al., 2021). The lack of social support networks meant that WOC had limited options for placing their racial and gender experiences in context because they were frequently isolated. Insufficient social support increased the likelihood that isolated faculty would internalize the gaslighting of their colleagues and doubt their own experience. Faculty members with sufficient social support can put their experiences into context and attribute them to systemic and interpersonal oppression rather than their own abilities (Rodrigues et al., 2021).

The way WOC interpret negative workplace experiences is influenced by the level of isolation and social support they receive. Colleagues and students who offer support play a crucial role in helping individuals deal with unexpected and unjust mistreatment. Negative experiences are internalized without such support, leading

participants to question their worth, abilities, or other qualities (Callan et al., 2014). This is particularly evident among non-tenure-track women, who experienced the most isolation and the most severe negative workplace encounters (Rodrigues et al., 2021).

Incivility

Incivility at work can have detrimental effects on both the company and individual employees. Individually, workers could perform worse on the job, be less satisfied and committed, withdraw from their work, and may be more inclined to quit the company altogether. Incivility can result in negative psychological consequences, including stress, anxiety, depression, exhaustion, or low self-esteem (Khan et al., 2024). Employees may put in less effort, be less likely to collaborate with others, refrain from engaging in extra-role behaviors, or even quit the company altogether, all of which can harm organizational success. The exclusion of historically marginalized groups can be exacerbated by workplace incivility, which disproportionately affects women and employees of color (Smith et al., 2021).

Coping and Identity Formation

African American women may utilize identity shifting as a proactive coping mechanism to mitigate the risk of experiencing discrimination. This strategy can involve modifying one's self-presentation in anticipation of potential bias, drawing upon previous encounters with prejudice (Szymanski & Lewis, 2015). Additionally, identity shifting can serve as a reactive response to immediate instances of discrimination (Jones et al., 2021; Szymanski & Lewis, 2015). Despite the discrimination African American women may experience, embracing their intersectional gendered racial identity serves as a source of

resilience, helping to mitigate the negative consequences of such experiences (Jones et al., 2021). Prior studies have found that identity shifting can enable individuals to engage with diverse groups, develop professional and personal connections, and advance in their careers (Dickens & Chavez, 2018; Jones et al., 2021). Empirical research indicates notable downsides to identity shifting. For example, a qualitative study by Dickens and Chavez (2018) exploring identity shifting among early career Black women found that some of the costs include feeling compelled to serve as a ‘model Black citizen’ or token Black woman, which entails pressure to carefully regulate their behaviors to represent other Black individuals, as well as a sense of inauthenticity.

An individual's gendered racial identity centrality reflects the personal significance and salience of their intersectional gender and racial identity (Jones et al., 2021). African American women with high gendered racial identity centrality may adjust their coping strategies based on the frequency of their experiences with gendered racism. Specifically, when these women encounter less gendered racism, they may utilize less detachment-oriented coping. In contrast, when they experience increased gendered racism, they may rely more heavily on detachment-based coping approaches (Watson & Henderson, 2022). These approaches suggest that African American women with high gendered racial identity centrality may be more inclined to appraise the gendered racism they face as stressful, subsequently triggering the enactment of a transactional stress and coping response (Jones et al., 2021; Szymanski & Lewis, 2015). Conversely, African American women with low gendered racial identity centrality may be less cognizant of

gendered racial stressors in their daily experiences and thus less inclined to appraise such encounters as inherently distressing (Jones et al., 2021; Szymanski & Lewis, 2015).

Precarious Employment and Its Impact on Academic Freedom

Precarious employment (PE) refers to nonstandard work arrangements characterized by low job security, which can have a negative impact on mental well-being (Rönnblad et al., 2019). For PE or nonpermanently employed staff, their academic careers are subject to the 'precarity' of temporary employment, placing them in a vulnerable position. Precarious employment in higher education intersects with diverse identities. It has detrimental impacts not only on the landscape of knowledge production and the dignity and well-being of precarious staff but also constrains academic freedom (Solomon & Plessis, 2023). Specifically, not everyone can express themselves freely or advocate for change without job security, as employment often hinges on institutional compliance, professional networks, and goodwill. This lack of freedom has two key facets: First, contingent staff face practical limitations due to the time pressures of a fixed-term contract in an organization where they likely lack status, visibility, recognition, influence, or the institutional knowledge and support networks (Blell et al., 2022; Misra et al., 2021). Second, there are psychological barriers, where contingent staff may self-censor due to the threat of not having their contracts renewed (Burton & Bowman, 2022; Zheng, 2020). WOC who work in academic institutions often encounter difficulties recognizing their expertise and qualifications and may face orchestrated campaigns to undermine their professional standing, which is a significant concern for those in precarious employment situations (Blell et al., 2022).

Fixed-term staff may feel compelled to self-censor their research and teaching content, avoiding topics deemed niche, risky, or unconventional. An unavoidable reliance on senior colleagues may further restrict the speech and practices of non-tenure-track academics. Many fixed-term employees require positive recommendations from superiors and must cultivate professional networks to secure goodwill and future employment (Blell et al., 2022). WOC in academia often encounter challenges to their professional authority, which threatens their careers, a salient concern for those in precarious employment. Higher education's corporate model of precarity and casualization dehumanizes its employees by treating them as second-class academic citizens, making them vulnerable (University and College Union, 2019).

The employment of nonpermanent educators on lower compensation has a detrimental impact on WOC educators, rendering them especially vulnerable when facing abuse. The precarious nature of employment and its intersection with racism and gender shapes the experiences of staff of color. This systemic racism leads to the dehumanizing conditions of insecure work and feelings of devaluation among these employees (Arday, 2022). Precarious contractual arrangements diminish the agency of these workers (Schofield, 2022). For WOC educators, their ability to address mistreatment is often constrained, and this can also directly influence their professional trajectories as educators.

A Weakened Sense of Identity and Belonging for Women of Color

WOC in higher education often encounter substantial difficulties concerning their sense of identity and feelings of inclusion. These individuals possess multifaceted

identities that intersect, such as race and gender (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). WOC have multiple identities that intersect, including race and gender. The concept of intersectionality can cause doubt in one's sense of self and belonging. Sense of belonging can be described as a basic human need (Strayhorn, 2012), yet many WOC deal with the lack of cultural awareness from their counterparts. This lack of cultural awareness can result in alienation and questioning one's sense of self-identity. Alienation can cause even more feelings of isolation, especially when their cultural values and norms differ from those of the dominant culture in academia. WOC deal with microaggressions, whether deliberate or not, that convey racial slights and insults that are hostile, disparaging, or negative toward people of color (Nadal et al., 2021). Microaggressions can gradually destroy one's self-esteem as well as cause feelings of inadequacy, further leading WOC to question whether they belong in the academic environment. Thus, frequent discrimination and microaggressions have been connected to many mental and physical health issues and a low quality of life (Williams, 2021).

Resilience and Empowerment

WOC face various obstacles related to their social identities and feelings of belonging within academic and professional contexts, including self-doubt, imposter phenomenon, and tokenization (Chance, 2021). They often experience self-doubt, feelings of inadequacy, and marginalization due to their identities, which can pose significant challenges to their sense of belonging within academic and professional settings (Chance, 2021). WOC in leadership roles face various challenges, including a

lack of accessible role models, the ‘concrete ceiling’ phenomenon, and the compounding effects of racism, sexism, and ageism (Chance, 2021).

Resilience manifests differently for individuals. When confronted with trauma, adversity, and life's demands, cultivating and sustaining resilience has enabled these women to navigate challenging experiences and foster personal and professional growth. Resilience does not imply that an individual is immune to adversity, trauma, or distress, but rather that it encompasses the protective factors and positive adaptations an individual employs in response to such challenging experiences (Chance, 2021).

The challenges faculty of color face in developing and sustaining a scholarly identity, particularly within predominantly White institutions, are ongoing. Some of the key challenges highlighted in the literature include the difficulty of navigating the implicit and explicit bias present in predominantly White academic environments, the heightened service expectations often placed on faculty of color, and the emotional and psychological toll of constantly having to navigate and negotiate one's identity within a system that was not designed with their needs in mind (Banks & Dohy, 2019).

For instance, studies have shown that faculty of color often experience ‘racial battle fatigue’ stemming from the constant microaggressions, stereotyping, and lack of support they face (Arnold et al., 2016; Quaye et al., 2024). These factors can make it challenging for faculty of color to maintain the level of productivity and visibility required for tenure and promotion, as they must dedicate significant emotional and cognitive resources to simply navigating their environment.

Consequently, these faculty members often internalize the inequities they encounter in their professional lives by absorbing racial messages and prejudices (Trejo, 2020). Faculty members disproportionately expect their colleagues of color to concentrate on ethnic and cultural topics while not holding White faculty to the same standards. Moreover, in predominantly White institutions, factors such as inadequate mentoring, social isolation, disproportionately teaching and advising responsibilities for faculty of color, and the devaluation of scholarship focused on minority populations can adversely impact the career progression of these faculty members (Dancy & Jean-Marie, 2014).

Dancy and Jean-Marie (2014) examined how feelings of inauthenticity are perpetuated in interactions between faculty and students. Imposter syndrome adversely affected faculty members' availability to students, student advising, and teaching evaluations. Instructors who exhibited minimal signs of imposter syndrome tendencies received even more positive overall ratings. This pattern also extended to advising, with instructors reporting lower levels of imposter syndrome feeling more at ease with advising and engaging more extensively with students compared to those experiencing greater imposter feelings (Dancy & Jean-Marie, 2014).

Social Support and Contextualization

Research suggests that the sting of racial discrimination may be eased by relying on the support of one's social network. For WOC, 'leaning on shoulders' may involve relying on the support of a range of individuals, including family members and friends (Seawell et al., 2014). Prior research indicates that WOC were more inclined to discuss

experiences of racism with their friends compared to men of color. Additionally, studies found that African American women utilized social support more extensively than men as a means of coping with racial discrimination (Utsey et al., 2011). While it is evident that WOC frequently utilize social support to cope with racial discrimination, the specific form of social support required to effectively mitigate the negative impact of racial discrimination remains unclear (Seawell et al., 2014). Personalized social support (support that specifically addresses racial inequality) may be more advantageous in mitigating these distinctive stressors than generalized forms of assistance.

In accordance with the optimal matching model, social support demonstrates its greatest efficacy when it aligns with the specific needs arising from a stressor. Social support that directly targets racist stressors may be more effective in mitigating the adverse impact of racial discrimination on psychological well-being and personal outlook compared to more general forms of support (Seawell et al., 2014). Social support can mitigate the detrimental effects of stress through two primary mechanisms. One approach is the buffering effect, whereby the positive impact of social support is most evident when it is provided during periods of heightened stress; in these instances, a high level of social support diminishes the influence of the stressor on the outcome variable (Hostinar & Gunnar, 2015). In contrast, social support can directly benefit individuals regardless of their level of stress, rather than solely mitigating the effects of heightened stress. Research indicates that social support helps mitigate the detrimental impacts of racial discrimination, allowing individuals with robust support networks to experience reduced psychological strain and more effective coping strategies (Utsey et al., 2011).

Furthermore, research has demonstrated that social support can directly benefit individuals by reducing symptoms of depression and anxiety, irrespective of the level of racial discrimination experienced (Buchwald, 2017). WOC, with high levels of social support for racial stressors, were protected from the negative effects of racial discrimination on their depression. In contrast, women with low levels of race-related social support and high levels of racial discrimination had the most depressive symptoms (Seawell et al., 2014).

Peer Support Networks

Peers within a minority woman's network who share similarities in age, status, or job role can provide both career and psychosocial support. These peer relationships exhibit a degree of mutuality, allowing both individuals to experience being both the provider and recipient of these functions (Kram & Murphy, 2014). Developmental networks offer support beyond professional domains, including peers, family members, and community members, which can serve as an effective alternative to traditional organizational mentoring for minoritized women (Janssen et al., 2014). These positive developmental experiences often lead to professional growth, career advancement, perceptions of a supportive work environment/culture, and improvements in navigating discriminatory spaces. The gender and racial composition of the mentoring relationship can impact the mentoring functions, where dissimilarity can negatively affect the quality of the mentoring/developmental relationship. Developmental network mentoring is particularly beneficial for women and WOC, especially when they lack mentoring opportunities within their universities, as different mentors/developers from various

domains can fulfill different roles, such as sponsor, confidant, or role model (Manongsong & Ghosh, 2021).

Academic Recognition and Awards

While the proportion of women receiving career awards has grown over time, they continue to earn substantially less recognition and less funding than their male counterparts. This discrepancy is lower than expected, suggesting a bias in recognizing their professional efforts and achievements. This gender disparity is even more pronounced for prestigious awards. The bias in distinguished recognition reinforces the misconception that only men can attain the highest levels of academic success, sending a harmful message to WOC. Furthermore, these funding and recognition disparities tend to have a compounding effect (Llorens et al., 2021; Meho, 2021). Research shows that the lack of academic recognition and awards can lead to IS among WOC professors, where they feel that their accomplishments are not truly deserved and that they are frauds who will be exposed (Llorens et al., 2021).

Scholarly recognition awards not only signify professional accomplishments but also contribute to building the reputations of academics, which may subsequently enhance WOC's career progression and earning potential (Silver et al., 2018). The underrepresentation of women, especially WOC, in prestigious research awards and grants indicates that these groups may face additional barriers in gaining the recognition and validation their male counterparts readily receive (Ma et al., 2019). The lack of recognition can exacerbate self-doubt and feelings of inadequacy, as some WOC faculty may question their own intellectual capacities and skills.

Public Recognition

Numerous policies and procedures have been implemented to address the hostile work environment that many WOC face, particularly in higher education. These measures are intended to create a more equitable workplace, provide opportunities for WOC, and foster a richer, more inclusive environment that welcomes not only White individuals but also allows for the advancement of all (Showunmi, 2023). However, the primary beneficiaries of these efforts are White women rather than WOC. White women have become the prominent face of diversity initiatives. Showunmi (2023) describes this phenomenon as 'White Women Syndrome,' which refers to the unspoken sentiment that many WOC experience when they feel they are encroaching on the 'pot of gold,' the recognition and rewards associated with professional success. Unfortunately, the limited resources available have been disproportionately allocated to White women. Despite the substantial time and effort WOC invest in service-related activities, their contributions are often overlooked and undervalued. This disparity persists despite the disproportionate labor they contribute (Matthew, 2016).

Subtle Manifestations of Racism and Sexism in Academia

While overt displays of racism and sexism still occur, they often manifest in more subtle ways. Racism is frequently subtly manifested in the everyday experiences by faculty members who are devalued as individuals through stereotyped expectations and treated as second-class citizens. They are required to prove themselves in ways not expected of their White peers (Kim & Meister, 2022). WOC have faced marginalization due to the misunderstanding of affirmative action policies by their White and male

colleagues. There is a common perception that these individuals were hired solely based on their marginalized identities and ability to help the institution achieve diversity goals rather than their merits. WOC faculty have reported that their success or persistence is often attributed to lowered standards. In contrast, WOC faculty at a large public research university felt compelled to work harder to prove themselves, as their colleagues believed they had been hired solely to fulfill diversity quotas (Kelly et al., 2021).

The minoritized identities of faculty of color are frequently highlighted and commented upon, rather than their scholarly work or contributions to the academic community. Furthermore, due to biases and assumptions regarding their academic abilities, as well as stereotypes about the appearance and demographics of professors, women and men of color are often misidentified and not recognized as faculty members. For instance, WOC are often mistaken for graduate students or university staff. Similarly, a Black male faculty member in a study by Griffin and colleagues recounted being asked if he was at a colloquium to move furniture, mistaken for a member of the facilities team rather than a professor (Griffin et al., 2011). In addition to being excluded from informal professional networks and experiencing limited interaction with colleagues, research indicates that women and men of color have reduced access to mentorship support.

A prevalent challenge encountered by women and men of color is the presence of assumptions regarding their levels of skill and competence (Griffin, 2020). Studies have found that Asian American, African American, Latinx, and international faculty members employed across various institutions experienced challenges in the classroom regardless of the institutional context (Davis et al., 2021; Griffin, 2020; Martinez et al., 2016).

Students often questioned the abilities and competence of these faculty members and engaged in acts of resistance, particularly in courses focused on diversity or social justice. The credibility of these faculty members was frequently questioned and challenged, coupled with expectations that they would entertain the class and be humorous and engaging (Griffin, 2020). For WOC faculty, classroom challenges are especially pronounced as they face intersectional marginalization stemming from both race and gender. Black, Latinx, and Asian American women instructors experience the undermining of their authority, doubting their competence, resisting discussions of social justice and equity, and demanding excessive emotional labor and permeable boundaries from White students (Corneille et al., 2019). Individuals with marginalized identities who conduct research focused on the needs and experiences of their own communities are often perceived as inherently biased, and their applied problem-oriented studies targeting the concerns of marginalized groups are frequently dismissed as lacking academic rigor and significance.

Institutional and community expectations often drive the elevated participation of WOC on campus committees and in diversity-related efforts. Administrators and colleagues frequently rely on these faculty members to contribute to campus diversity and provide guidance on equitable and inclusive policies and practices. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as 'cultural taxation,' where faculty of color face pressure to fulfill multiple demands related to their institution's diversity and inclusion needs (Griffin, 2020; Lin & Kennette, 2022). WOC experience racism and sexism during the promotion evaluation process, in addition to being evaluated based on criteria that do not accurately

reflect their contributions to the academy. Explicit and subtle biases operate within academic institutions, leading to the reproduction of the status quo and the exclusion of certain groups from access to resources and networks that facilitate professional advancement (Mitchneck et al., 2016).

Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize that the evaluation of the work of women and men of color, their experiences with social isolation and inadequate support, and the allocation of work responsibilities are significantly shaped by the campus climate, the behaviors, and biases of students and colleagues, as well as the inherent racism and sexism within campus structures and systems. Additionally, the cumulative effects of underrepresentation, exclusion from professional networks, hostile and discriminatory environments, and lower levels of job satisfaction combine to adversely impact the personal and career outcomes of women and individuals from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups (Stamarski & Hing, 2015). Extensive research both within and beyond academia has demonstrated that women and individuals from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups are frequently perceived as possessing lower potential and being less competent and consequently are disproportionately less likely to be selected for hire than their White counterparts, despite having analogous backgrounds and professional qualifications (Lin & Kennette, 2022; Muradoglu et al., 2021; Tree & Vaid, 2022).

Impacts of Imposter Syndrome

IS can have far-reaching impacts on WOC professors in higher education, who may struggle with feelings of self-doubt, anxiety, and even burnout because of the unique challenges they face. These experiences can further marginalize WOC within the

academy, making it difficult for them to fully engage and thrive in their roles (Fields & Cunningham-Williams, 2021; McGee et al., 2023). The feelings of not belonging and being overlooked can have a detrimental impact on their self-perception regarding social acceptance and academic competence, hindering their ability to thrive in the classroom environment (Saunders et al., 2023).

Research has found that feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy among women faculty members contributed to their decisions to depart from colleges and universities before achieving tenure (Dancy & Jean-Marie, 2014). Previous studies have found that individuals experiencing strong imposter syndrome are more inclined to self-sabotage their efforts (Dancy & Brown, 2011). Imposter feelings are more likely to attribute poor performance to internal factors to a greater extent than their nonimposter counterparts. The underrepresentation of racial and ethnic minorities in middle to senior academic ranks can foster feelings of isolation (Bernard et al., 2020; Bravata et al., 2019; Chakraverty, 2022). WOC feel that the lack of representation of the faculty body makes them feel isolated, and there is a sense of ‘cultural disconnectedness,’ which causes them to struggle to establish meaningful and comfortable relationships. Given the difficulties stemming from low representation, many faculty of color encounter obstacles in developing a self-perception as potential leaders (Freeman et al., 2019). For instance, without visible role models, it can be difficult for newer faculty of color to envision themselves in positions of power and influence within their institutions. Feelings of cultural disconnection and loneliness prevent many professors of color from seeing themselves as prospective leaders. Such loneliness can impede the formation of a

leadership self-concept and result in emotions of exclusion from decision-making processes. It can also be challenging for professors of color to envision themselves as future leaders, as they often believe they must meet higher standards to be considered for leadership roles (Freeman et al., 2019).

Mental Health Challenges

Although the term ‘syndrome’ used in popular culture may imply a clinical diagnosis or psychological disorder, IS has never been formally classified as such by authoritative organizations such as the American Psychiatric Association or the World Health Organization. Instead, it has been characterized as a self-reinforcing psychological phenomenon in which individuals doubt or dismiss their accomplishments and fear being perceived or exposed as fraudulent (Cokley et al., 2017). Despite external evidence of their competence, those experiencing imposter feelings or fears tend to misattribute their success to chance, luck, or fate. Furthermore, they believe they have somehow deceived others into thinking they are competent and thus constantly fear that their perceived ineptitude will be uncovered. Consequently, they often place excessive pressure on themselves to overperform to prove they deserve their achievements (Clance & Imes, 1978). This phenomenon has been linked to adverse mental health outcomes, including anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem (Chakraverty, 2022; Garba et al., 2024; Sakulku & Alexander, 2011). Initially believed to primarily affect professional, high-achieving women, IS has since been observed in culturally diverse adolescents, emerging adults, college students, male professionals, and postgraduate trainees (Garba et al., 2024).

Analyses demonstrated that WOC reporting higher frequencies of racial discrimination and women reporting lower levels of distress resulting from racial discrimination were most vulnerable to adverse mental health outcomes, particularly at higher levels of imposter phenomenon (Bernard et al., 2017). Empirical research has linked IS to a range of negative mental health outcomes, such as depressive symptomatology, anxiety, diminished self-esteem, and psychological distress (Bravata et al., 2019). Individuals may internalize experiences of discrimination as evidence of their self-perceived incompetence, which, in turn, may reinforce self-deprecating cognitions that promote adverse mental health outcomes.

High Emotional Demands. Teaching is an emotionally intensive profession distinct from others. Effective teaching is characterized by positive emotions, and strong teacher-student relationships are essential for a productive classroom environment. The conceptualization of emotional labor in the educational context suggests that students resemble customers, and the operation of a school parallels the management of a company that must market products and serve clientele (Hochschild, 2012; Töre, 2020). High emotional demands in the workplace may prompt instructors to employ emotional labor strategies that are effective in regulating their own feelings, thereby allowing them to focus on other aspects of their work (Subramaniam & Kadowaki, 2014). Instructors may employ various coping mechanisms to address the emotional demands of their work, such as dismissing student resistance and appeasing their students. According to Subramaniam and Kadowaki (2014), instructors dismissed or ignored what they deemed unreasonable feedback on teaching evaluations, such as criticism that courses addressing

race, class, and gender were overly focused on the issues of women or people of color. Another strategy employed by instructors to address classroom challenges was student appeasement, to mitigate resistance and foster a more positive and constructive learning environment. While many instructors genuinely care for their students, the successful and consistent display of these sentiments demanded significant emotional labor, which could be quite arduous for the instructors.

Teachers engage in emotional labor in the classroom, managing their emotions to create a positive learning environment. Studies show that teachers who struggle to manage their emotions experience stress; however, effective teaching also requires teachers to regulate their feelings and display enthusiasm, happiness, and passion (Paterson et al., 2021; Subramaniam & Kadowaki, 2014; Töre, 2020). While some instructors may utilize emotional labor strategies to effectively regulate their own emotions and focus on other aspects of their work, the long-term consequences of such efforts can be detrimental to their well-being and commitment (Töre, 2020). Furthermore, studies have suggested that teachers' self-efficacy, or their belief in their ability to effectively manage their classrooms and instruction, can help mitigate the negative effects of emotional labor (Çetin et al., 2024; Li, 2023)

Negative Relation to Self-Esteem. Feelings of the imposter phenomenon are more prevalent among women, potentially stemming from societal gender stereotypes that associate assertiveness and achievements more readily with men than women (Clance & Imes, 1978). IS frequently co-occurs with other psychological conditions, such as low self-esteem. Research has shown a strong negative correlation between self-

esteem and IS feelings, with the latter positively linked to depression (Freeman et al., 2019). Minority status stress, characterized by the challenges of enduring stereotypes, discrimination, and cultural differences, is significantly associated with psychological distress (Cokley et al., 2017). The combination of minority-status stress and imposter syndrome exacerbates negative mental health outcomes, and a greater propensity for imposter syndrome was associated with higher levels of psychological distress and lower self-esteem in people of color (McClain et al., 2016; Peteet et al., 2015).

Furthermore, racial discrimination may serve as a moderating factor in the relationship between imposter syndrome and mental health outcomes for WOC (Bernard et al., 2017). WOC must confront not only specific stereotypes based on their gender and race but also broader negative perceptions about the intellectual abilities and performance of their entire racial group. This desire to disprove these group-level stereotypes is frequently linked to elevated anxiety and diminished performance — a well-documented phenomenon referred to as stereotype threat (Hill & Vera, 2024). *Stereotype threat* refers to the situational predicament in which individuals are at risk of confirming a negative stereotype about their social group. This phenomenon has been observed in academic settings, particularly among racial minorities and women, who are threatened by stereotypes about academic intelligence and quantitative skills, respectively (Bancroft et al., 2017)

Academic Performance Pressure

Imposter syndrome is characterized by individuals experiencing persistent self-doubt and feelings of fraudulence, particularly regarding their intellectual or academic

accomplishments (Clance & Imes, 1978). Those affected often struggle to internalize their successes, attributing them to external factors such as luck or favorable circumstances. Moreover, those scoring highly on measures of IS are also more likely to exhibit symptoms of anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. Given the emphasis on academic performance and the competitive environment of higher education, WOC may be particularly vulnerable to IS (Pannhausen et al., 2022; Schubert & Bowker, 2019; Wang et al., 2019). Studies have found that individuals who set excessively high standards for achievement are more susceptible to experiencing IS (Garba et al., 2024; Pannhausen et al., 2022; Schubert & Bowker, 2019). Specifically, scores on measures of IS correlate positively with maladaptive forms of perfectionism, which are believed to be detrimental to mental health and academic performance (Pákozdy et al., 2023). Concerns about being an imposter may be amplified among early-career academics in brilliance-oriented disciplines, where individuals may feel more doubtful about their competencies and experience greater pressure to ‘prove’ their abilities. While anxieties about one's skills may be common among WOC regardless of context or discipline, the environment of brilliance-oriented fields is likely to exacerbate these concerns (Muradoglu et al., 2021).

Gendered Negotiation Systems

Gendered negotiation systems— the negotiation processes experienced by WOC are shaped by prevailing gender-based norms and expectations, which present them with distinctive challenges (McGee et al., 2023). WOC faculty in higher education institutions receive lower compensation than their White and male counterparts (McGee et al., 2023).

The findings indicate that WOC face identity-related burdens that compel them to navigate gendered negotiation systems to attain equitable compensation. Additionally, the racial backgrounds of WOC appear to shape how they manage the consequences of pay disparities. Stereotype management emerges as a form of identity taxation that WOC employ to navigate their academic environments. The research suggests that, rather than addressing the structural racism within higher education, these institutions shift the responsibility onto scholars of color to utilize strategies for protecting themselves from the reality of race-based and gender-based wage inequality (McGee et al., 2023). To safeguard themselves from potential repercussions stemming from salary negotiation, WOC must navigate the complexities of managing both racial and gender-based stereotypes.

Furthermore, when comparing wages by education, WOC earn less compensation than men with comparable or lower educational attainment. For instance, in 2017, African American women holding an advanced degree, such as a master's, earned \$17 less per hour than White men with an advanced degree and \$7 less per hour than White men with a bachelor's degree (IWPR, 2024). Additionally, a White man with a bachelor's degree or higher earned an annual salary of \$80,974, nearly \$30,000 more than an African American woman with a bachelor's degree or higher. Native American women require a master's degree to surpass the wages of a White man with only a high school diploma (Yearby, 2019). WOC experience a compounded effect of both sex and racial discrimination, resulting in lower wages compared to men and other women. However, existing anti-discrimination laws and policies do not adequately address this

intersectional discrimination. Courts often restrict the legal claims of WOC to either race or sex discrimination, failing to recognize the combined impact of these two forms of bias (Yearby, 2019).

Some women downplay the significance of wage disparities, either by emphasizing other advantages or by embracing a race- and gender-neutral perspective. WOC are aware of the wage gaps in their field; however, to safeguard their mental or physical well-being, they choose to disengage from the ongoing struggle for pay parity. Women rationalize their disengagement as either a measure of self-preservation for their mental health or a belief that the effort was futile (Hernandez et al., 2019; Hirshfield & Joseph, 2011; McGee et al., 2023). WOC faculty often rely on their own initiative to advocate for themselves and mentor other WOC faculty, as their institutions have provided unsatisfactory responses. The experiences of pay inequity for WOC in academia are frequently compounded by other forms of exclusion and marginalization they face (McGee et al., 2024).

Social Comparison and Authenticity

The context in which women operate is crucial to the experience of IS. Women often look to others to define the characteristics of an authentic academic or professional. By comparing themselves to those they perceive as genuine in these roles, women may notice discrepancies and begin to view themselves as frauds. This sense of inauthenticity then fuels a perilous cycle in which women attempt to anticipate how others perceive them and modify their behavior accordingly (Edwards, 2019). Women who experience IS persist in believing they are not truly intelligent and have somehow deceived others who

consider them accomplished. Women suffering from IS do not feel deserving of the praise and recognition they receive for their academic or professional achievements. Rather than acknowledging their accomplishments as well-deserved successes, women with IS perceive these achievements as overestimations of their abilities and talents (Mullangi & Jagsi, 2019).

IS and stereotype threat represent distinct but related phenomena, both of which capture the anxiety experienced by certain marginalized populations, such as women and racial minorities, stemming from their interpretation and internalization of external perceptions. Privilege and oppression (constructs grounded in ideologies) create a sense of alienation and reinforce dominant societal narratives (Edwards, 2019). Consequently, some marginalized individuals may struggle with profound feelings of not belonging or pervasive self-doubt, which affects how they navigate. Rather than embracing their authentic selves, they conceal, disguise, or modify their identity to gain acceptance from the dominant group. How individuals are perceived and treated by significant others is a crucial antecedent to experiencing imposter feelings. This is because people's routine social interactions are permeated with important evaluative signals that convey whether others view them as valuable and worthy. These social evaluative cues guide individuals' assessments of their own self-worth, thereby shaping their self-esteem and sense of being deserving of their 'place' within a particular group or context (Feenstra et al., 2020). Such subtle everyday oversights convey that these employees' ideas, knowledge, and perspectives are deemed less valuable than those of other employees, potentially

perpetuating issues with workplace confidence and engagement (Stamarski & Hing, 2015).

Coping Strategies for Women of Color Professors

WOC academics employ sophisticated strategies to navigate barriers and maintain successful academic careers, including analysis, vigilance, self-care, and resilience. They face significant obstacles and challenges in navigating the pathway to professorship, including undermining, bullying, and opaque promotion processes. Despite these barriers, these women demonstrate resilience, employ effective strategies to navigate these challenges, and make significant contributions to their fields (Rollock, 2023). WOC reported experiencing passive or overt bullying, ranging from being ignored in meetings to facing personal verbal abuse and derogatory remarks (Rollock, 2023). *Passive bullying* involves subtle behaviors, like derogatory comments or excluding colleagues, that undermine the target's self-esteem and competence. Due to its subtle nature, passive bullying is difficult to identify and address, often going unchecked. This can lead victims to question why they feel attacked, as the individual's acts may seem harmless (Waseem & Nickerson, 2023).

WOC employ strategies to navigate academic challenges, including demonstrating their expertise and isolating themselves. They establish clear boundaries between work and personal life and seek therapeutic support to manage racial battle fatigue and survive in academia (Danquah et al., 2021). WOC professors employ dedicated and purposeful strategies to navigate academic challenges, including establishing boundaries, seeking therapeutic support, and carefully managing their

professional demeanor and communication. These strategies reflect their need to suppress and manage their true feelings in response to microaggressions, as they do not have the same freedom as their White peers to react openly or uncivilly (Rollock, 2023; Wilkins-Yel et al., 2018).

WOC in the workplace face physical, mental, and emotional strain, responding in various ways to cope. They employ both adaptive and maladaptive strategies to handle race-related stress (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2019). *Adaptive coping strategies* are the positive approaches that individuals use to address race-related stress, such as problem-solving, seeking emotional support, and reframing their mindset. Adaptive coping strategies include, but are not limited to, engaging in communication or confronting racism, forming professional networks, turning to religion/ spirituality, seeking mentorship, setting boundaries, and engaging in self-care (Apugo, 2019). For instance, some individuals may try to detach themselves from the problem by denying the existence of the race-related stressor, or they may work harder to prove others wrong.

Many WOC utilize adaptive coping strategies to address the race-related stress they face in higher education workplaces, including confronting racism through open communication, building personal and professional networks, engaging in self-care, and setting boundaries. They found that addressing racial microaggressions through open dialogue helped significantly reduce their levels of stress. WOC set boundaries to leave work at work and make time for their personal lives. However, they also employ maladaptive strategies, such as avoidance and overworking, when faced with racism (Apugo, 2019; DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2019; Jacob et al., 2022). Creating dedicated spaces

for faculty of color can foster networking, social connections, and mentorship opportunities. This provides a ‘safe space’ where they can take a break from navigating predominantly White environments and White-centric dialogues. Additionally, White colleagues and leaders can support WOC faculty by acknowledging the structural inequities that create disproportionate burdens for this group (Lin & Kennette, 2022).

Summary and Conclusions

The existing literature highlighted several major themes surrounding IS among WOC professors in higher education. A key theme was the disproportionate impact of IS on women and ethnic minorities in academia (Feenstra et al., 2020; Stone et al., 2018). Research suggested that women and ethnic minorities were more likely to experience imposter feelings, in part due to broader societal biases and stereotypes that portrayed these groups as less competent or belonging in academia (Feenstra et al., 2020).

Another important theme was the interplay between IS and racial discrimination. Studies showed that experiences of racial discrimination could exacerbate imposter feelings as individuals began to internalize negative societal messages about their abilities (Feenstra et al., 2020; Lee & Morfitt, 2020). The institutional context also played a crucial role, as women and ethnic minorities often lacked representation, role models, and equal opportunities within predominantly White academic environments. These structural barriers further contributed to IS by making individuals feel like outsiders or illegitimate members of the academic community (Dancy & Jean-Marie, 2014; Feenstra et al., 2020). Additionally, the literature highlighted the unique challenges faced by WOC professors, who had to navigate both gender and racial biases. While imposter syndrome

was a significant challenge, the literature also examined potential coping strategies and interventions. However, it cautioned against overly individualistic approaches that placed the responsibility on the individual to overcome imposter feelings rather than addressing the broader systemic issues at play (McGee et al., 2021). Given the complex and multifaceted nature of IS among WOC professors, the literature emphasized the critical need for comprehensive, institutional-level support and reform to address this issue (Feenstra et al., 2020; Fields & Cunningham-Williams, 2021; Lee & Morfitt, 2020; McGee et al., 2021). The literature also explored the detrimental mental health consequences of IS, including increased stress, anxiety, and burnout, which further hindered the career advancement and well-being of WOC professors in academia (Fields & Cunningham-Williams, 2021).

WOC in academia frequently experience IS, feeling inadequate despite their qualifications and achievements. Systemic barriers and a lack of representation contributed to this phenomenon. They faced common challenges, including cultural disconnection and misalignment with institutional values, which led to isolation and invisibility. Their unique intersectional experiences created pressures not faced by peers. Systemic inequities underlay the underrepresentation of WOC in academia, impacting their sense of belonging and professional identity (Chakraverty, 2022). Despite these challenges, WOC demonstrated resilience and utilized coping strategies, with social and institutional support systems playing a crucial role. Negative workplace experiences, such as subtle racism and sexism, also affected their mental health and academic performance. Addressing these challenges required effective institutional support systems. Academic

institutions were urged to prioritize diversity, inclusion, and awareness to address the challenges faced by WOC (Fields & Cunningham-Williams, 2021).

The psychological impact of IS on WOC in academia remained poorly understood. Further research was needed to examine how these experiences influenced career progression and personal well-being over time. While some coping strategies had been identified, there was limited understanding of the most effective mechanisms and their applicability across different academic fields and contexts. There was insufficient data on the efficacy of specific institutional interventions to support WOC and implement these changes effectively. More research was needed to understand how different identities interacted with race and gender to influence experiences in academia. No longitudinal studies examined the long-term consequences of IS for WOC in academia. Existing research was limited in scope and primarily relied on small sample sizes, which made it difficult to generalize the findings.

This present study aimed to address some of the gaps in the current literature on IS among WOC professors in higher education. Specifically, it utilized a qualitative, phenomenological approach to deeply explore the subjective, lived experiences of WOC professors navigating IS within their academic careers. By gathering the lived experiences of this population, the study provided contextualized insights into how IS was exhibited, navigated, and impacted the professional and personal lives of WOC in academia. Importantly, the study also examined how the intersection of race and gender influenced this population's experience of IS.

Chapter 3 presented the research methods used in the present study, including details on the research design, rationale, and role of the researcher. In-depth information on the methodologies was provided, and issues of trustworthiness were also addressed.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

This qualitative study explored the meaning of IS among WOC professors in higher education. The chapter provided a comprehensive framework to ensure rigor and credibility in the research process. It began with a brief overview, rearticulating the purpose of the study as established in Chapter 1, which set the context for the detailed research design and methodology. This section outlined the qualitative research approach chosen for the study and justified its alignment with the research question and objectives. Central concepts, such as IS and intersectionality, were defined to clarify their relevance to the research. The researcher's role was articulated, emphasizing transparency regarding any personal or professional relationships with participants. Strategies for managing biases and addressing ethical considerations were discussed to uphold the integrity of the research process. The methodology section elaborated on the participant selection logic, detailing the target population, sampling strategies, and inclusion criteria. The chapter specified the number of participants, the rationale for the sample size, and the recruitment and data collection procedures. In the instrumentation section, I identified all data collection tools, justified their selection, and discussed their validity and reliability. The analytical strategies for making sense of the collected data were outlined, connecting each data type back to the research question.

Attention was given to establishing trustworthiness in the study, covering aspects of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Ethical considerations were thoroughly addressed, including obtaining participant consent, maintaining

confidentiality, and managing data. The chapter concluded with a summary of the key methodological points and a transition to Chapter 4, where the study results are presented, emphasizing the systematic approach taken throughout the research process.

Research Design and Rationale

The research question guiding this study was: What is the meaning of imposter syndrome among women of color professors in higher education? The phenomenon of interest was IS experienced by WOC professors in higher education. IS was characterized by individuals doubting their accomplishments and persistently fearing being exposed as fraudulent despite evidence of their competence and success (Bernard et al., 2017). This phenomenon was particularly prevalent among high-achieving individuals, including women and racial/ethnic minorities in academia, who often confronted compounded challenges due to systemic barriers and discrimination (Stone et al., 2018). A descriptive phenomenological research design was employed in this study to explore the meaning of IS on WOC professors in higher education. This design was appropriate because it focused on the study of an individual's lived experiences within the world (Giorgi, 2012).

This approach was essential for comprehending complex phenomena such as IS among WOC professors, where the intersection of identity, systemic barriers, and personal experiences influenced how individuals perceived and navigated their professional lives. While phenomenology traditionally focuses on lived experiences, it extends to how individuals make meaning of those experiences. According to Giorgi (2009), phenomenology emphasizes the subjective nature of experience and the importance of understanding how individuals perceive and make meaning of their

realities. This perspective was vital when studying IS because it was not merely about feelings of inadequacy but also about how these feelings were constructed within specific social, cultural, and institutional contexts. Descriptive phenomenology entails a rigorous and systematic approach to understanding human consciousness and experience (Giorgi, 2012). This method enables researchers to delve deeply into participants' narratives, extracting general structures that reveal how individuals make sense of their experiences with IS. By focusing on the participants' perspectives, the research highlighted the nuanced ways in which systemic factors, such as race and gender, interacted with personal feelings of inadequacy.

In the context of this study, descriptive phenomenology provided a framework for exploring how WOC professors experienced and comprehended IS in an academic setting. The experiences of these individuals were shaped by their unique intersections of race, gender, and professional identity, making it imperative to understand not only what they experienced but also how they made meaning of those experiences (Giorgi, 2012). This approach enabled the identification of underlying meanings and general structures that could inform institutional practices and policies to support marginalized faculty (Giorgi, 2012). The use of descriptive phenomenology in this research contributed to the existing literature by providing rich, qualitative data that highlighted the voices of WOC professors, an often underrepresented group in academic research. By employing this methodology, the study aimed to bridge the gaps in understanding how these professors navigated their academic environments while coping with feelings of IS. The insights gained aimed not only to enhance academic discourse but also to serve as a foundation

for developing strategies that addressed the unique challenges faced by WOC in higher education.

A qualitative design was suited for this study, as it enabled an in-depth exploration of these individuals' complex and nuanced experiences and emotions (Giorgi, 2012). Unlike quantitative approaches, which focus on numerical data and statistical analysis, qualitative research emphasizes the richness of participants' narratives and the meanings they ascribe to their experiences (Giorgi, 2012). A qualitative approach was crucial for understanding the subjective nature of IS, which was influenced by various personal, social, and institutional factors. By conducting semistructured interviews, the research captured the voices and perspectives of WOC professors, thereby providing insights that could inform institutional policies and practices aimed at promoting equity and support.

Role of the Researcher

My role as the researcher in this descriptive phenomenological research study was that of an observer-participant, involving engagement with participants to gather insights into their lived experiences while maintaining objectivity (Giorgi, 2012). Researching the meaning of IS among WOC professors in higher education necessitated addressing potential ethical concerns, particularly regarding the personal and professional relationships between the researcher and participants. Given my identity as a WOC working in a higher education setting, it was vital to explain the nature of my relationships with the participants to uphold the integrity of the research. To mitigate potential conflicts of interest, I decided not to interview individuals employed at the same

institution. This decision was based on the understanding that power differentials could significantly influence the dynamics of research interviews (Kaaristo, 2022). By ensuring that the study participants were external to my professional environment, I aimed to eliminate any perceived or actual power imbalances that might arise from my role as an instructor. Additionally, the lack of any supervisory dynamic with the study participants was intended to cultivate a climate of trust and transparency during the interviews, allowing participants to feel free to share their experiences without concern for potential consequences or criticism, which was essential for ensuring the authenticity of the collected data (Giorgi, 2012).

As a researcher, I was aware of my position as a WOC in academia. My background might influence my understanding of the participants' experiences, so I practiced self-reflection to minimize bias in data collection and analysis. Power imbalances could exist in research, especially in academic settings. I aimed to create a more equitable and respectful dialogue by selecting participants from outside my institution. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and could be withdrawn without consequence (Xu et al., 2020). This study offered no incentives, as the value of participants' lived experiences was considered sufficient motivation for them. This approach reduced the risk of coercion and ensured voluntary participation. Although I was aware of the ethical implications of researching within my academic environment, I chose to focus on external participants to avoid conflicts of interest and maintain objectivity, underscoring my commitment to ethical research practices and prioritizing the well-being of participants. Given my background, I remained vigilant about potential

biases. Ethical considerations, including informed consent and confidentiality, were strictly adhered to.

Methodology

The methodology of this study was presented to facilitate replicability and data access. The participant selection criteria, sampling approach, instrumentation, data analysis plan, recruitment, data collection procedures, and considerations of trustworthiness and ethics were reported in this section.

Participant Selection Logic

The target population comprised faculty members from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds currently employed at higher education institutions. This study employed a purposive sampling strategy to recruit 12-15 WOC faculty with at least one year of academic experience. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure that the participants met specific criteria for the issue being studied. Participants were chosen based on their identity as WOC and their experiences with IS in their academic careers. This targeted approach aimed to gather detailed, relevant data that highlighted the lived experiences of this population (Giorgi, 2012). The study required 12-15 participants recruited through social media (Facebook and LinkedIn) and Walden's participant pool. Outreach involved posting a recruitment flyer on social media that described the study's purpose, eligibility criteria, and voluntary participation process, along with a link to review the consent form before participation. A description of my study was posted on the Participant Pool webpage.

The population for this study consisted of WOC professors in higher education, representing a diverse range of racial and ethnic backgrounds, including but not limited to African American, Latina, Asian American, and Indigenous women. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to intentionally select participants who met specific criteria related to the research focus. This approach was justified as it allowed for exploring the unique experiences of WOC professors who had encountered IS in their academic careers. Eligible participants identified as WOC, held a faculty position at a higher education institution, and had at least one year of experience in their current academic role. Additionally, they acknowledged experiencing IS in their academic or professional lives. Participants self-identified as meeting these criteria during the recruitment process, ensuring that their insights aligned with the study's focus.

The study aimed to interview between 12 and 15 WOC professors. Selecting 12-15 participants allowed for a manageable yet informative sample size, with the understanding that the final number might be adjusted based on the iterative data collection and analysis process. Participants were recruited through a social media flyer disseminated on platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn, which outlined the study's purpose and eligibility criteria, a link to the consent form, and contact information for any questions. Recruitment also occurred via Walden's participant pool, where a description of my study was posted on the Participant Pool webpage. This targeted approach aimed to engage potential participants directly and encourage them to share their experiences related to IS in a supportive environment.

Instrumentation

Semistructured interviews served as the primary data collection tool, allowing for open-ended responses that captured participants' lived experiences with IS (Ruslin et al., 2022). Interviews were recorded via Zoom to ensure accurate transcription and analysis. Audio recordings were transcribed using Microsoft Word for ease of analysis and interpretation.

I developed interview protocols, drawing on existing literature on IS and best practices for qualitative interviews. The selected methods adequately addressed the research question, providing a rich account of the participants' experiences and coping mechanisms related to IS. Walden University faculty reviewed the interview protocol to ensure its relevance and appropriateness for the target demographic. The instruments were designed to be culturally sensitive, avoiding assumptions about participants' experiences and ensuring that questions resonated with their academic and personal contexts (Saunders et al., 2023). The selected data collection method, semistructured interviews, and the use of Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological analysis were appropriate for addressing the research question. This approach was designed to yield valuable insights into the meaning of IS on WOC professors in academia.

For Researcher-Developed Instruments

An interview guide consisting of 12 open-ended questions and follow-up questions located in Appendix A was developed by me in alignment with the purpose of this study, which was to explore the meaning of IS among WOC professors in higher education. The interview guide was developed to address the research question and the

gap in the literature where research had not focused exclusively on the experiences of WOC faculty members dealing with IS. Interview questions 1 through 5 addressed the self-determination theory, and interview questions 6 through 12 addressed the intersectionality theory. All 12 questions and follow-up questions were written to address this study's phenomenon and the concepts of the conceptual frameworks utilized, which were SDT and intersectionality theory.

The data collection instruments were grounded in the extensive literature on IS and the experiences of WOC professors in academia. Key sources included foundational studies on the imposter phenomenon and recent works examining its impact on marginalized groups (Bernard et al., 2017; Stone et al., 2018). The instruments were informed by theories of self-determination and intersectionality, providing a framework for questions addressing the unique challenges WOC professors faced. Established qualitative research methodologies, including guidelines for sensitive interviews (Neubauer et al., 2019; Patton, 2014), were integrated into instrument development. The content validity of the interview guide was established through an iterative process of thoroughly reviewing all aspects of the dissertation to ensure alignment with the problem, purpose, framework, and research question regarding the literature examined in Chapter 2. This iterative process validated the interview guide's ability to elicit rich data that addressed the significance of this study.

The semistructured interview format allowed participants to share their experiences while guiding the conversation to key general structures (Englander & Morley, 2021). The interview protocols were evaluated on their ability to address the

central research question about the lived experiences of IS among WOC professors. The questions were designed to elicit in-depth responses about feelings of inadequacy, systemic barriers, coping strategies, and the impact of intersectional identities. This approach ensured comprehensive data collection to answer the research question and contribute valuable insights into the experiences of WOC professors navigating IS in higher education.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Participants were recruited through a post shared in relevant social media groups, including Facebook and LinkedIn, as detailed in Appendix B. The flyer included a brief overview of the study, participant eligibility criteria, a link to complete the demographic questionnaire, and access to the consent form as detailed in Appendix C, and contact information for any questions. Interested potential participants accessed the informed consent through a SurveyMonkey link provided on the flyer. They then provided their consent and completed the demographic questions. I then verified that they met the eligibility criteria. Once eligibility was confirmed, I emailed the participant requesting available dates and times to schedule the interview. Once the time was confirmed with the participant, I then emailed a Zoom link. If initial recruitment efforts proved insufficient, additional strategies such as extending the recruitment period, utilizing more channels, and offering incentives were considered (Smith et al., 2021). There was no backup plan; I was optimistic that posting in groups would effectively reach the target participant pool.

Interviews were conducted via video conferencing (Zoom). I conducted the interviews to ensure consistency and reliability. Each interview lasted approximately 36 to 80 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. If more participants were needed, additional outreach would include direct contact and collaboration with community organizations (Hai-Jew et al., 2015). Overall, the data collection methods and instruments were designed to gather rich, in-depth data that addressed the specific research question and provided insight into the meaning of IS on WOC professors in higher education.

Data Analysis Plan

The data collected through semistructured interviews yielded in-depth experiences addressing the research question. These narratives provided insights into the participants' lived experiences with IS, including the challenges they navigated and the strategies they employed to cope. The interview structure facilitated the exploration of the participants' feelings of self-doubt, the systemic obstacles they encountered, and the influence of their intersectional identities on their academic experiences. The data were analyzed using Giorgi's (2009) descriptive phenomenological method. Giorgi's phenomenological method aimed to uncover the meaning of the participants' lived experiences; it meticulously described each participant's distinct experience in detail, and it considered the entirety of the participant's experience, considering evolving contexts, relationships, temporality, and perspectives, to derive an overarching structure (Giorgi, 2012). Manual hand coding, using color coding in Microsoft Word to organize meaning units and emerging patterns, was employed to facilitate efficient data structuring and analysis.

The first step was an initial reading for a 'sense of the whole' (Englander & Morley, 2021). The initial phase involved a thorough reading of each participant's entire descriptive narrative to establish an overall understanding of the experience. Each transcript was read multiple times to foster a broad understanding of the lived experience of imposter syndrome. This iterative whole-part-whole approach ensured that subsequent interpretations of meaning units were contextualized within the entirety of the description.

Step two involved adopting the phenomenological psychological attitude, distinguishing this method from other qualitative approaches. This involved practicing the epoché, or suspending the presuppositions of the natural attitude, and assuming the phenomenological psychological reduction (Englander & Morley, 2021). This perspective focused on how participants articulated their lived experiences of awareness, enabling descriptions of the phenomenon as it was directly experienced.

Step three involved dividing the data into meaning units to manage the complexity of lengthy descriptions. I divided each participant's narrative into smaller segments called meaning units, each representing a distinct shift or difference in meaning. This segmentation occurred through careful, repeated reading, identifying where one meaningful expression ended and another began. The length of meaning units varied, but each was manageable enough to permit detailed analysis (Englander & Morley, 2021).

Step four involved transforming everyday expressions into psychological meaning. With the meaning units identified, I transformed the participants' everyday

expressions into psychologically sensitive descriptions. This involved elucidating and explicating the fuller psychological meanings embedded within the naive accounts, guided by the phenomenological attitude (Englander & Morley, 2021). I remained open and receptive, allowing the essential meanings to emerge without adding or theorizing beyond the participant's expression. The transformation synthesized these meanings into generalizable psychological insights relevant to IS, while respecting the individuality of each account. This step was organized in a three-column format (original expressions, meaning units, and transformed meanings) to ensure transparency and rigor.

Step five involved returning to the whole and moving toward the general structure. I synthesized the transformed meaning units into a coherent general structure that captured the essential, invariant psychological features of the IS experience as a whole. The final structure represented an integrated whole composed of interrelated substructures, each contributing to the overall psychological meaning of the phenomenon (Englander & Morley, 2021). In keeping with Giorgi's phenomenological principles, this structure captured the unified essence of participants' lived experiences while remaining situated within their cultural and academic contexts. This process aimed to depict how the phenomena were lived, including both experiential and conscious moments, from a psychological perspective.

Issues of Trustworthiness

The researcher's trustworthiness was demonstrated through a transparent approach to conducting, interpreting, and drawing conclusions from the study (Cloutier & Ravasi, 2020). To affirm the trustworthiness of my research, I employed a consistent questioning

strategy, avoiding inessential subject matter, and presented the same questions to each participant. This approach ensured the research adhered to standards and produced an acceptable study.

Credibility

The credibility of the findings was established by adhering to the principles of Giorgi's (2009) descriptive phenomenological approach. All interview transcripts were compiled into a single document, organized by research question and participant response, to allow systematic comparison across participants. Meaning units were identified, transformed into psychological meaning units, and synthesized into overarching structures and substructures. Color coding was applied to the meaning units to visually cluster similar patterns and ensure consistency in analysis. Throughout this process, all analytic documents, including meaning unit tables, transformed units, and structural syntheses, were submitted to my chair for review and feedback to ensure accuracy and alignment with Giorgi's method. This systematic and transparent process strengthened the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings. Chapter 4 includes detailed descriptions and verbatim participant quotes to provide a strong foundation for the overall structural synthesis.

Transferability

To ensure transferability, several key strategies were employed. The interview guide was designed to align with the research question, allowing participants to provide detailed accounts of their experiences. The use of semistructured interviews promoted detailed responses and offered opportunities for participants to share nuanced

perspectives. Purposive sampling was employed to select a diverse group of participants, varying in age, background, and experience, to ensure that the findings could be applied to others with similar characteristics. Data collection continued until saturation was achieved, thereby enhancing the thoroughness and richness of the findings by ensuring that no new patterns or structures emerged (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Furthermore, detailed records of the sampling methodology, participant demographics, and contextual information were maintained, enabling an assessment of the results' applicability across various contexts and populations.

Dependability

Maintaining a structured and consistent research approach reinforced the dependability of the study's findings (Nguyen et al., 2021). I dedicated sufficient time to building trust with participants and facilitating more meaningful interviews.

Dependability was ensured by maintaining a systematic and transparent analytic process consistent with Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological approach. All transcripts were compiled into a single master document organized by research question and participant response to maintain analytic consistency. Meaning units were extracted directly from the verified transcripts, transformed into psychological meaning units, and synthesized into overarching structures and substructures that reflected the shared essence of participants' experiences. Each stage of the analytic process, including the meaning-unit tables, transformation tables, and structural syntheses, was reviewed by the dissertation chair for feedback.

Confirmability

To ensure confirmability, I practiced reflexivity throughout the interview process with each participant (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). This reflexive approach involved continuously reflecting on my own experiences, thoughts, feelings, and potential biases, ensuring they did not interfere with or distort the participants' voices (Peddle, 2021).

Ethical Procedures

Adhering to ethical guidelines was crucial in this research. Ethics encompassed preventing physical harm to participants and mitigating emotional distress (Takeda, 2021). During the interview process, I upheld strict confidentiality, respect, and professionalism, avoiding unrelated topics raised by participants while maintaining an approachable and friendly demeanor. Recruitment and selection procedures began only after approval from the Walden Institutional Review Board.

Treatment of Human Participants

Informed consent was obtained electronically. The social-media recruitment flyer directed prospective participants to a secure study page (via SurveyMonkey), where they reviewed the IRB-approved consent form and indicated their agreement before completing the demographic questionnaire and scheduling the interview. The informed consent clearly outlined the purpose of the study and explained how collected information would be transcribed and coded (Nusbaum et al., 2017). Participants provided consent via the SurveyMonkey link before their interviews. The informed consent form included details about the virtual interview platform and explained the process of audio recording, transcription, and use of data within the study. Confidentiality

was maintained throughout all stages, starting with recruitment procedures (Kang & Hwang, 2023). Recruitment involved posting a social media flyer on Facebook and LinkedIn that described the study and its eligibility criteria, directing interested individuals to a secure study page for additional information. The Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved this recruitment approach prior to data collection.

Treatment of Data

Before each participant interview, I described the data collection methods to them. Interview transcripts were segmented into meaning units and transformed into meaning units consistent with Giorgi's method. De-identified transcripts and analysis tables were stored on a password-protected device, with the identity key kept separately in a secure location. The data remained anonymous, without personal identifying information, and were securely stored. Participant names were coded by pseudonyms, and no names or identifying information were used in any written or typed documents to protect privacy (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2017). The computer used for transcription, coding, recording, and writing was password-protected and securely stored when not in use. Recorded interviews and all accompanying notes and documents were secured in a locked file accessible only to the dissertation chair and the second committee member of Walden University, as required.

Summary

In Chapter 3, I provided an overview of the research design and rationale for this study. The research design aligned with the research question: What is the meaning of imposter syndrome among WOC professors in higher education? The role of the

researcher was described as that of an observer-participant, with the purpose of the dissertation reported prior to obtaining consent and ensuring confidentiality (Iseselo & Tarimo, 2024). Security measures were discussed to ensure participants felt at ease during interviews. The methodology outlined steps for participant selection. The instrumentation was described, detailing the interview guide that was used. The chapter elaborated on recruitment, participation, and data collection procedures, ensuring confidentiality, privacy, and freedom from coercion. The data analysis plan was discussed, including the semistructured interview process. Lastly, ethical procedures and issues of trustworthiness were addressed in detail.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of IS among WOC professors in higher education. Utilizing Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method, the research sought to understand the nature of IS experienced by these professors, how intersecting identities shape these experiences, and the personal or institutional factors that influence their sense of belonging, competence, and professional identity. The research question guiding this study: What is the meaning of imposter syndrome among WOC professors in higher education?

The chapter begins with a description of the research setting, followed by an overview of participant demographics and a detailed account of the data collection process. Next, the data analysis process is explained, outlining how meaning units were identified, transformed, and organized into psychological structures using Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological approach. Evidence of trustworthiness is addressed by describing strategies used to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The chapter concludes with a summary that transitions into the interpretation of results in Chapter 5.

Setting

This study was conducted virtually via Zoom to accommodate participants' locations and professional responsibilities. Interviews were conducted with both audio and video enabled to foster rapport and allow for a more personal interactive experience while maintaining confidentiality. Prior to the study, participants provided informed

consent via a SurveyMonkey link that contained the consent form, where they could select "Yes, I consent" to the documentation approved by the IRB.

After the participant consented, an email was sent to them asking for a few times that work best for them and their time zone. Interviews were then scheduled based on the participants' availability and confirmed with them before the Zoom link was created and sent. Before the interview began, it was reiterated that the process was confidential, and participants would be given a pseudonym. The participants were reminded that the process was completely voluntary, and they could withdraw at any time. The interview process was explained to participants to inform them that there would be 12 interview questions, each with a follow-up question, and the interview would last approximately 45-60 minutes.

During data collection, participants mentioned that their experiences were shaped by personal and institutional conditions, including changes in institutional leadership, heavier teaching loads, and ongoing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work at their respective institutions. These contextual elements occasionally influenced participants' articulation of IS, as organizational changes and new expectations in the workplace frequently intensified their experiences of being scrutinized, overworked, and marginalized in higher education.

Demographics

Twelve women of color professors in higher education institutions participated in the current study. Each participant met the following inclusion criteria: identified as a woman of color, currently employed as a professor at a higher education institution for at

least 1 year, and had experienced IS in their academic role. The participants represented a diverse range of academic disciplines, faculty ranks, and years of experience in higher education.

For confidentiality purposes, all participant names were changed to pseudonyms. Prior to the interview, participants completed a brief questionnaire that included demographic questions, such as academic rank, years of teaching experience, tenure status, and type of institution. Table 1 includes a demographic summary of participants to help situate findings and maintain confidentiality.

Table 1

Demographics of Participants

Participants	Age range	Years as professor	Tenure status
Trisha (P1)	25–34	3	Nontenure
Sasha (P2)	35–44	5	Tenure track
Kendra (P3)	45–54	10	Tenured
Amber (P4)	45–54	4	Nontenure
Lila (P5)	25–34	3.5	Tenure track
Raina (P6)	25–34	1.5	Nontenure
Winter (P7)	35–44	5	Nontenure
Sophia (P8)	35–44	3	Nontenure
Joyce (P9)	55–64	10	Nontenure
Daniela (P10)	35–44	5	Tenured
Latrice (P11)	35–44	5	Tenure track
Mary (P12)	35–44	3	Nontenure

Data Collection

Data collection for this study commenced on August 28, 2025, following receipt of approval number 08-28-25-1177207 from Walden's IRB. The study's flyer was shared on social media platforms (Facebook and LinkedIn), and the study was also posted on Walden's Participant Pool webpage. Overall, 17 individuals responded to the flyer, but only 12 interviewed. The data collection method was semistructured interviews via Zoom (audio and video).

Participants interested in participating in the study read and accepted informed consent by selecting “Yes, I consent” from a secure web link (SurveyMonkey), which also contained the demographic questionnaire. Each participant completed the demographic questionnaire before the interview. I read their responses to confirm that they met the inclusion criteria: self-identify as a woman of color, employed as a professor at a higher education institution for at least one year, and experienced IS in academia. After I determined that they were eligible, I emailed them to arrange a date and time to conduct the interview. Once the date and time were confirmed, I sent each participant a personalized Zoom link.

Before beginning the interview, I reiterated the study’s purpose and data collection procedures. I then addressed their questions and received verbal consent to proceed with recording the interview. I asked all participants the same set of open-ended questions to guide the interview, following the semistructured interview protocol (see Appendix A) to ensure uniformity while providing probing questions to clarify or elaborate on answers as needed. Each participant was interviewed once, and no additional

interviews were conducted after the twelfth interview. The interviews lasted between 36 and 80 minutes, totaling 10 hours, 53 minutes, and 36 seconds, with an average duration of 54 minutes. Only one incident happened during the interviews. Participant 4 was originally scheduled for an interview the day prior, but they became unavailable and rescheduled for the following day.

Zoom's recording feature was used to record both audio and video of the interviews. The recordings were transcribed verbatim, and then the transcripts were reviewed for accuracy against the recordings. The transcripts were stored on a password-protected computer accessible only to the researcher. Pseudonyms were used to replace all identifying information to protect confidentiality.

The data collection process for this study followed the steps identified in Chapter 3 and was completed as outlined. The steps were not altered in any way, and no unexpected events occurred that may have impacted data quality or uniformity. The final transcripts were compiled into a single document, organized by question and the participant's response to each, totaling 381 pages. The descriptive information of the interview data is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2*Descriptive Information of Data*

Participant	Length of interview in minutes	Length of transcript in Times New
		Roman, 12 ft., 1.5 spacing
P1	46	12
P2	46	12
P3	50	14
P4	74	20
P5	50	15
P6	74	17
P7	36	10
P8	49	13
P9	67	13
P10	41	13

Data Analysis

The analysis used Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method. I read each transcript in its entirety to obtain a sense of the experience, delimited meaning units (MUs) at each change in meaning while maintaining the participant's wording, transformed the MUs into psychologically sensitive statements (staying in a phenomenological attitude and bracketing presuppositions; TMUs), synthesized the TMUs into a situated structure for each participant, and did a cross-case synthesis to express a general structural description of the phenomenon. I maintained an audit trail (MUs to TMUs decisions) to ensure the process was transparent. A color-coded Word document with the interview questions and the participants' MUs for each question allowed me to cluster similar MUs and inductively group them into categories, elevating them to psychological structures when they recurred across multiple participants. They

were necessary for describing the experience, and they were coherent with the developing general structure. No substantially new structures occurred by the twelfth interview.

Data analysis followed Giorgi's (2009) descriptive phenomenological method, inductively moving from individual narratives toward the psychological structures that represented the essence of participants' experiences.

First, each transcript was read in its entirety to gain a holistic understanding of the participants' experiences. Next, the text was divided into meaning units, which are segments of the transcript where a clear shift in meaning occurred. For example, when a participant transitioned from describing feelings of isolation to describing coping strategies, a new meaning unit was identified.

Each meaning unit was then transformed into psychologically sensitive language to highlight the underlying psychological significance while preserving the participants' intent. For instance, participant 1 stated, "Cast as the 'fixer' after being ignored upfront; expertise discounted until crisis, denied credit when proven right." This was transformed into the psychologically sensitive statement: "The participant experienced gendered and racialized role assignment that devalued her foresight and labor, fueling imposter feelings until recognition came only in moments of crisis."

Shared meaning units were grouped into categories that reflected shared experiences among participants. These categories were then compared across all 12 participants using cross-case synthesis to reveal broader patterns of meaning. Finally, categories were organized into psychological structures that captured the essence of participants' lived experiences. This process allowed for the identification of the essence

of imposter syndrome among WOC professors in higher education, grounded in their authentic lived experiences.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

I addressed issues of trustworthiness in the data collection and data analysis processes by demonstrating honesty, thoroughness, and accuracy. In Chapter 3, I addressed the four criteria for trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

The credibility of the study was established by adhering to Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological approach and ensuring the fidelity of participants' lived experiences (Elo et al., 2014). Although formal member checking was not conducted, data verification was achieved through repeated review of audio recordings and transcripts. Each Zoom interview was transcribed verbatim, and all audio recordings were re-listened to in their entirety to verify accuracy and capture both explicit and nuanced meanings. I engaged repeatedly with the data, identifying and transforming meaning units into psychologically sensitive statements to ensure that interpretations remained faithful to participants' intended meanings. To further enhance credibility and dependability, all coding tables, meaning-unit analyses, and structural syntheses were submitted to my dissertation chair for review and feedback.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the ability to apply study results to another setting (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I enhanced transferability by providing a thorough

description of the study's context, participant demographics, and setting, allowing readers to determine the applicability of the findings to other contexts. I intentionally recruited participants from diverse disciplines, ranks, and institutional types to reflect a range of perspectives among WOC in higher education. I also included rich, verbatim quotations from participants in Chapter 4 to illustrate how each structure emerged directly from the data. These detailed contextual and participant descriptions enable readers to evaluate the extent to which the findings can be applied to similar populations or academic environments.

Dependability

To ensure dependability, I maintained a clear and consistent research process from recruitment through data analysis. I followed the procedures outlined in Chapter 3 without deviation and documented every step in an organized audit trail. I used Microsoft Word's autosave function and backed up all files on an external hard drive and in email to prevent data loss. I stored interview recordings, transcripts, and analytic documents in labeled, password-protected folders and compressed them into secure zip files for archival purposes. Throughout the analysis, I kept detailed records of coding decisions and evolving meaning units so that another researcher could trace how I moved from raw data to the final overarching structures and substructures.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the extent to which other researchers can verify the findings of a study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). To ensure the confirmability of the study, I addressed researcher bias and attempted to create an audit trail, ensuring transparency. I

took precautions to address these concerns by using various methods. I secured all raw data, transcripts, and analytical documents, both on a hard drive and in Microsoft Word with the autosave function, so that none of the information would be lost in the event of a technological failure, and to preserve the original documents intact. I created folders containing all the information related to the study, including consent forms, transcripts, codes, and spreadsheets. I labeled and zipped these for each participant, as well as for the study itself.

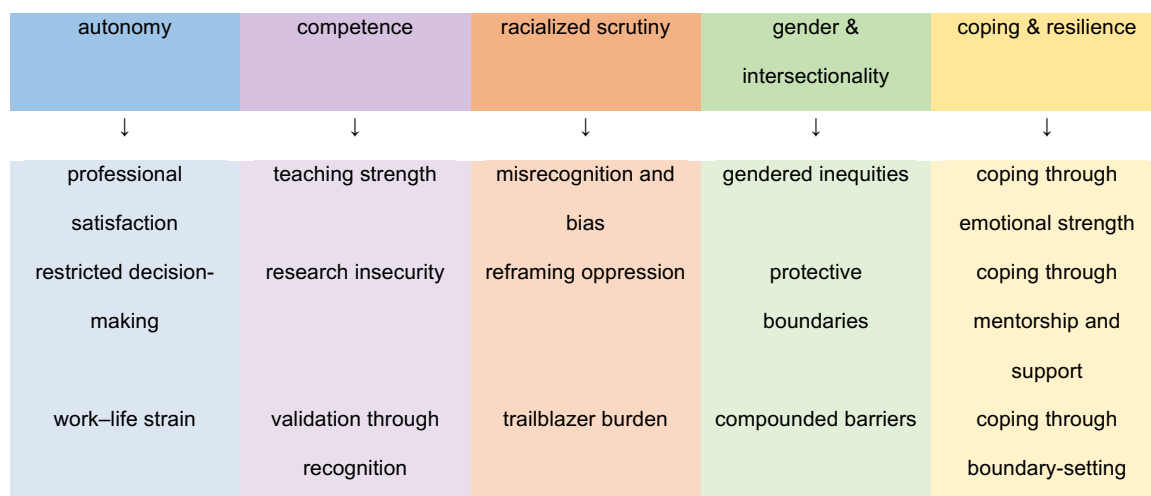
I also created an audit trail of codes and structures by taking detailed notes in a Word document, which could be used to see the process by which the data was collected, coded, and analyzed. In these records, I noted any analytic decisions, psychological structures, and thoughts, ensuring that these steps were transparent for review by other researchers. To ensure that the codes and psychological structures accurately reflected the participants' experiences and perspectives, I continually cross-referenced the coding and structures with the transcripts. In the event that anything was misplaced or lost, I created email back-ups of important documents.

Results

Results of the data analysis yielded five overarching structures: autonomy, competence, racialized scrutiny, gender and intersectionality, and coping. These five overarching structures gave way to 15 substructures, which are shown in Figure 1.

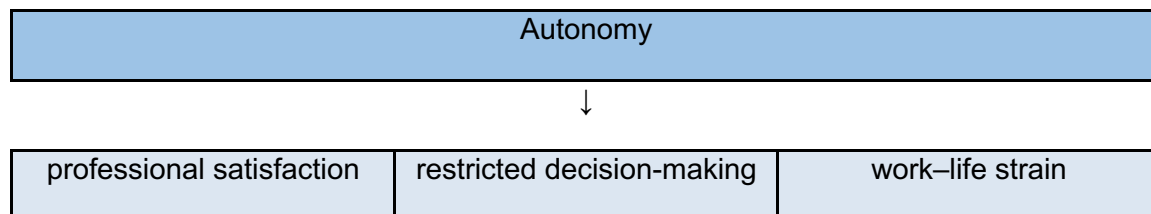
Figure 1

Overarching Structures and Substructure for Imposter Syndrome Among Women of Color Professors in Higher Education



The overarching structures and substructures addressed the research question:

What is the meaning of imposter syndrome among women of color professors in higher education? Guided by Giorgi's (2009) descriptive phenomenological method, participants' narratives were segmented into meaning units, transformed into psychologically sensitive statements, and synthesized into essential structures. The resulting structures revealed IS among WOC professors as a systemic, relational phenomenon shaped by autonomy, competence, racialized scrutiny, and gendered intersectional barriers.

Figure 2*Overarching Structures and Substructures for Autonomy***Overarching Structure 1: Autonomy**

Participants described autonomy as both empowering and constrained within their academic environments. The ability to make independent decisions about teaching, research, and service provided a sense of professional fulfillment and creative expression. However, institutional hierarchies and prescriptive departmental policies often limited that freedom, reinforcing feelings of marginalization and reduced control. While autonomy sometimes offered validation of expertise, many participants also reported that their authority was questioned more frequently than that of their peers. As a result, autonomy emerged as a negotiated experience, simultaneously a marker of professional satisfaction and a source of tension when institutional structures restricted decision-making. P1 reported:

So, in my current role, everything is kind of planned for me. Everything is already created, and I just plug it in. So, in my current role, I don't feel like I have a lot of autonomy as far as what is expected of me to teach. But they do give me autonomy in pulling resources that I deem scholarly and necessary to further my

students' understanding. So, I would say if there was a scale from 1 to 10, I would say my autonomy is about a 5. Yeah, so about kind of neutral.

P2 reported:

My autonomy is an illusion. Meaning that I'm given the job description, I'm given the plight of what is supposed to happen, what the ultimate goal is, but before I make those decisions, I still have to go back to the president. I still have to go back to whomever.

P6 reported:

I would say it's like half and half. I work at a private college, but the way that their school operates is like everybody's teaching the same thing, essentially. So, we all have the same lectures. So, they're kind of like pre-made already. So, I don't really have autonomy in like the lecture that I teach. I just have autonomy as to how I choose to approach the lesson.

Substructure 1: Professional Satisfaction

This substructure represented participants' sense of fulfillment and purpose when their teaching, research, or service aligned with personal and institutional values.

Professional satisfaction arose when participants exercised creative control in their courses or felt that their expertise was respected by colleagues and leadership.

Many participants experienced professional satisfaction when their autonomy was supported within their institutions. Autonomy was most often expressed through freedom in course design, the ability to integrate personal research into teaching, and validation from student engagement. For these WOC professors, such opportunities affirmed their

expertise, reinforced their sense of belonging in academia, and countered feelings of IS. Participants described autonomy as a form of agency that allowed them to design courses that reflected both disciplinary knowledge and their lived experiences. This validation from both institutional freedom and student responses was central to how they understood their professional competence.

P3 reported:

I'd say there's a good bit of autonomy. Honestly, it's like, and I tell my current students this, it's one of the reasons why I chose this job over other jobs, because I have worked other jobs. I was a home health aide before I did this. And I know the difference between having someone like breathing over your shoulder, telling you what to do every 5 seconds, versus actually having choices and being able to kind of make my own schedule throughout the week. So, I would say there's a lot of autonomy.

P4 reported:

At this point in my life, I don't question my competence a whole lot. Not because I think I know everything, because I'm a true learner. I don't even refer to myself as an expert, but others do. And so, I think, out of confidence and out of resistance, because people have tested everything, they can test in me. And I'm 47 years old. So, it's, you know, I done put in my time a bit. There's not much that I'm going to like question my own confidence.

P5 reported:

I think that I have a great deal of autonomy, which is both a positive and a negative because the autonomy has not been supported with a blueprint for success. So, it's kind of been like a free reign kind of situation for me, unlike some of my colleagues in other departments and even with people hired after me in my same department.

P7 reported:

I perceive my level as being very capable of what I do. I'm able to catch on quickly and learn different things. I've had that experience here where I've served in several different roles, so I've had to be flexible, so I've had to just adjust. And I feel that my level of education is well within what I've needed to do so far.

P8 reported:

I teach at two different schools. I think that the newer styles of the way the courses are being designed and outlined, the autonomy is great with it. I'm able to put my own spin on the course objectives and things like that. Both courses that I teach, they do have the syllabus and the objective already pre-built, but if you want to add things to it, then you're able to add things to it. They don't pigeonhole you and tell you to just stick what their curriculum department has created. So, they do give you the autonomy to adjust things here and there.

P9 reported:

For the most part, I have full autonomy. In some instances, it just depends. I taught at two different schools, and each has sort of a different way of doing things. One, you have a prescribed curriculum, but you can teach it the way that

you see fit. And at the other one, we worked more like partners. We had partner teachers that we worked with. So, I just think it depends on the school. So, I would say, mid to full autonomy.

P11 reported:

Okay, so with the teaching, I have positioned myself in a way that I can get sort of real-time feedback. So, my students in almost all of my classes complete what I call a reflection journal every few weeks. And that is their opportunity to tell me how they are experiencing the course and the content of the course. And so, I don't have to wait until the end of the semester to get a course evaluation. Now, I look at that and factor that in as well.

Substructure 2: Restricted Decision-Making

This substructure captured the lack of autonomy participants experienced when institutional policies, rigid curricula, or micromanagement limited their freedom to teach, design research, or advocate for equity. Participants described feeling powerless to make meaningful academic decisions, reinforcing feelings of IS.

In contrast to participants who experienced freedom in course design and student engagement as validation, several participants described constraints that undermined their sense of autonomy. These constraints included highly scripted courses, silencing of perspectives, and restricted decision-making. Faculty felt that rigid institutional structures not only limited their creativity but also contributed to feelings of being undervalued, isolated, and vulnerable to IS.

P1 reported:

I had experience at the R2 institution, where I felt my autonomy was undermined, undermined because the course that I was teaching dealt with cultural competency, and so, we were having a discussion about othering, which, you know, sometimes, it's kind of like; why all the Black kids sitting together, so we were talking about othering and how, it's natural for you to go towards what you're familiar with. And in the classroom, we were having discourse, and I made a comment just saying, you know, in my younger years, I thought all Black people were monolithic. And so, I always felt like my understanding of Black culture was superior to anyone else's experience. And so that was taken totally out of context. And it got to leadership, and they made it seem, like I said, there was only one way to be Black, and that my way was the Black way or the highway. And it was like, now, you know that's not what was said, but it's like they tried to use that experience to humble me in a way. And they didn't humble me. I walked out the door. I sent in my resignation, like, right after that.

P2 reported:

Supported as far as long as it was going with current strategies, or the current mission, and what the board wants, absolutely. You go for it. And then sometimes it was just more so them giving me a script, and me putting it in my own words, and I said it so long that it felt like it was mine. But really, it was not.

P3 reported:

So, at my previous institution, I had a dean try to interfere with a search, actually, because he looked at it and he saw all the finalists were faculty of color. And he

made a phone call to the Department of Chair, who in turn made a phone call to me because I was chairing the search. They made no paper trail of this to try and talk me into making sure there were White applicants who would be among the finalists. I didn't change anything, and it ended up being a faculty of color who got the job. But that was like one of these kinds of like little backdoor ways they exercise, try to clamp down on your autonomy.

P5 reported:

When I first got hired, I was thrown a whole variety of classes. Quite honestly, I think I had more classes than people who had tenure and who had a lot more experience than I did. And nothing was explained. So, I wasn't certain if it was like when I was an adjunct teacher, and I was able to recreate the classes myself. Later, to find out that autonomy didn't come with the explicit instructions, that the program itself was very scripted. The assignments paralleled the other instructors who were teaching the same sections because of the way the program itself was developed. And so, I was kind of thrown into it and it was like birthed by fire because it took students that had friends in the other cohorts that were like, why do you not have this worksheet?

P6 reported:

I remember like, this was probably my third semester there. There was a basketball player who came to my class running late. But in my class, I always give the first 10 minutes to decompress. We do a low-stakes activity just to get students involved and ready, since many are athletes coming from film or

practice. This time gives them a chance to unwind. So even though he was late, he knew I built in that space, it's okay as long as when the lesson starts, he's there and mentally present. The coach was really angry, maybe just having a bad day. But instead of emailing me to ask about my class policy or even going to my direct supervisor, he went straight to the director of academics. What he didn't know was she had already observed my classroom, understood how it works, and approved it. I ended up emailing him to say the undermining wasn't necessary, that he could have just asked me about my protocol and I would have gladly explained. But it did create this like tension.

P10 reported:

Overall, I think in terms of my research, I feel pretty autonomous. I think where I feel a little bit more pressure is in my teaching role. And I just remember the day that the administration signed that like anti-DEI executive order or whatever. I was walking to class when like the New York Times thing came on my phone. And we were going to talk about White privilege and White guilt and all of these other things. And I was like; I don't want to go to jail today. And so overall, even though I have the ability to decide what I'm going to add to my courses, just the vibe feels restricting. And so, I've kind of self-censored, unfortunately, just because I want to not go to jail and I want to be able to continue doing my job.

Substructure 3: Work–Life Strain

This substructure reflected the tension between professional responsibilities and personal obligations. Many WOC professors described difficulty maintaining balance

while fulfilling teaching, service, family, and mentoring roles; often feeling guilty or inadequate in both spheres. Autonomy was not only shaped by institutional structures but was also deeply influenced by the personal and family contexts of the participants. Participants described the challenges of balancing caregiving responsibilities, health and wellness stressors, and boundary pressures alongside professional demands. Several participants highlighted how personal responsibilities directly shaped their perceptions of freedom in academic work, sometimes reinforcing imposter thoughts when they felt overstretched or unsupported. For some, unexpected tragedies further complicated the ability to sustain balance between personal life and academic expectations.

P2 reported:

So, I've always worked harder and longer to the detriment of even losing my family. Because I wanted to be the last at the office, I needed to answer the phone when my boss would call me at 5:30 in the morning and say, hey, are we closing school today because, it snowed. Now, technically, that's my decision as a dean of the school. But again, I had to answer to my boss.

P3 reported:

I've had various health issues that pop up, that it's like, man, how am I going to do this? How am I going to do that? I'm married to someone who's not an academic. So, in some ways I feel like I don't fit in because, like a lot of academics, they're married to either other academics or other people with fancy degrees and \$8 billion a year income. It's kind of like; I don't fit here. But yeah, so like outside fact, I'd say probably honestly, the health stuff has been the main one because I've

had various health things that came up pre tenure multiple times. Like it wasn't like life or death, but it was like kind of reality check moments.

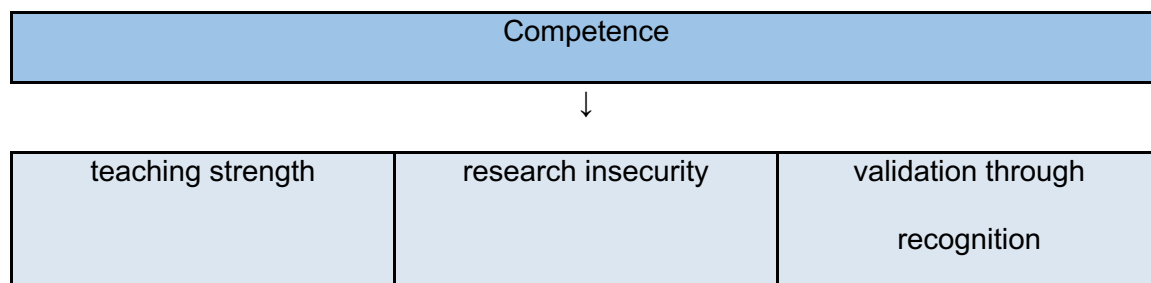
P11 reported: "I'm not getting ready to die up in here. Y'all can have y'all ivory towers."

P12 reported:

I had a role where I was teaching, and I had a tragedy happen in my life that I'm still recovering from. And I don't know if I'll ever recover from it, and I just got hired onto 2 new universities. And I had to let those universities go. They were both very nice about it, both very sweet about it. But one of the universities required that you do like a weekly webinar, which I don't mind. I don't mind doing that at all. But the only thing was the weekly webinar, they scheduled it. Like, I don't mind if I schedule it myself. If I schedule it, it's great. I can do it. But they scheduled it, and it was like 8 o'clock at night. There's no autonomy there.

Figure 3

Overarching Structures and Substructure for Competence



Overarching Structure 2: Competence

Many WOC professors exhibited strong self-efficacy in teaching and mentoring, yet they often experienced ongoing uncertainty regarding their research productivity and

recognition. Their experiences indicated that external validation, through awards, publications, and positive student feedback, temporarily strengthened confidence but seldom eradicated underlying doubt. Consequently, competence represented a dynamic equilibrium between demonstrated skill and internalized self-scrutiny, highlighting how imposter feelings persisted even in the face of tangible success.

P3 reported:

So, with my teaching, I've always felt like very confident and kind of like no questions about my ability to teach. To be blunt, I often feel like I'm a better teacher than who I get put with as a psychology faculty because I came out of education. Whereas I'd say my research, that one's a little more challenging.

P4 reported:

So, for me, it's always about the growth of who I'm working with. And so, I don't base it on the department itself. I base it on what my students have learned and what they have to say about me. But I'm also a person that believes in best practices and looking at things through a very diverse lens and making sure that I'm addressing all of that.

Substructure 4: Teaching Strength

This substructure referred to the validation and confidence participants gained from effective classroom engagement, positive student feedback, and recognition of pedagogical skill. Teaching success often reaffirmed their competence and helped counter IS. Teaching provided tangible evidence of competence and belonging that directly countered feelings of IS, especially when students voiced appreciation,

demonstrated learning, or requested to take additional courses with them. Participants reported that positive student evaluations, mentoring relationships, and recognition for classroom excellence served as direct affirmations of their capabilities. In some cases, participants expressed that while other areas of academia (such as research or navigating institutional politics) could amplify imposter thoughts, the classroom remained a space where they felt grounded, confident, and effective. Teaching thus emerged not only as a professional duty but as a deeply meaningful validation of their identity as scholars.

P1 reported:

And so, my very first cohort of novice teachers. I still have relationships with them today. So, that let me know that our time spent together was a positive experience for them, and it was impactful for them, and so that kind of helped me be more comfortable. You know what, I can do this. They will still reach out to me, hey, doc, I have a student who needs something. I have other teachers say hey, I have a situation with a parent who's a colleague, and this student is this. How would you approach that conversation? So, it's like people appreciate my experience in the field, my expertise, and they seek it. So that lets me know that I am beneficial in some way. And this is what I'm called to do.

P3 reported:

One that I didn't expect that has popped up when it comes to mentoring students. So, there's certain stuff that it's like, you know, I second guess myself because when I was a grad student, I didn't come from the right fancy advisor and all this kind of stuff. So, I didn't get recognition. And I'm not saying that it's just about

that, but it matters. And I know that it matters. I resent that I like got excluded from that. And like, I feel like I had to work harder just to make someone like pay attention to what I was doing, be willing to be invested in it. But the thing that's been interesting is now that I have doc students who are getting PhDs, watching the ways that their work gets recognized. And that has been interesting. Like, so in some ways it's kind of like, oh man, wow. Like, I wish they had done that whenever I was a student. But at the same time, it's like, as a mentor, any win they get is a win in my view. Like, I want to see them succeed.

P4 reported:

I think for me, it's always about the student, whoever they are at that time. I do professional development for the staff. So, both sides, I have to do some form of education. So, for me, it's always about the student. And I think I do a very good job of looking at what, where we start to also how we finish. So, kind of that pre and post self-assessment and making sure that I'm addressing the needs, addressing the requirements.

P7 reported:

I feel very confident as a researcher because my background says that's what I do. I feel more confident as a researcher than I do as a teacher, even though I feel I get when I'm teaching across to the people that I'm teaching or presenting to.

P10 reported:

Like most campuses, they put some stock on the teaching evaluations, even though we know that they're racist and sexist and all of these things. But I have

actually been very fortunate. I have the highest teaching evaluations in our department. I don't know what that says about my teaching when we know all the problems with those evaluations, but I've been able to kind of use it to say, hey, I obviously know what I'm doing. The students enjoy my courses even though we talk about difficult topics.

P11 reported: “Also, when I get students that want to take multiple courses with me, I think that also is a good signifier that I'm doing well with that.”

Substructure 5: Research Insecurity

This substructure described worries about research productivity, publication expectations, and external evaluation. Although participants demonstrated strong teaching and mentoring abilities, their confidence was often less secure in the area of research. Many described ongoing struggles with producing scholarship, presenting at conferences, and navigating publication processes. These experiences were especially difficult when research topics included race or other sensitive subjects, as participants expressed heightened vulnerability about how their work would be received and judged. The tension was clear: success in teaching affirmed their academic identities, but research often became the space where IS resurfaced most strongly. Even recognition or awards in research did not always eliminate doubt; instead, they sometimes magnified internalized pressure to perform at an even higher level. For WOC professors, research insecurity thus represented a recurring site where IS was reinforced, despite their accomplishments.

P1 reported:

I feel 100% confident in my instruction delivery. I feel less confident in my abilities as a researcher because that's not what I do. I look at existing research, and, you know, I use existing research, but I'm a practitioner. I'm an EdD, not a PhD, so my strength is more in using existing research, finding gaps in research to improve practice, versus conducting the research myself.

P3 reported:

I did get the Spencer National Academy of Ed Postdoctoral Fellowship, which then that helped a ton for kind of like, okay, so people who are in power in my field think someone should keep doing this. Like, that's good. But in some ways, it also kind of like had the unexpected side effect of making me even more self-conscious about it.

P6 reported:

In June of this year, I presented at my first academic conference, and I was nervous about it. I know that my research is good. I know that. I know that my research is necessary and that it's needed, but I didn't know how well received it would be because my research focuses on the experiences of Black women, faculty at private PWIs.

P11 reported:

Listen, I just got a bunch of rejections, not conference rejections. I'm trying not to take it personal. But you know, it's interesting because this work is all about feedback. So, when you submit work to journals and you waiting to hear the editorial reviews and if it's going to be accepted, if it's going to be rejected, if it's a

review and resubmit. So for me, it is still difficult for me, even though I mentioned like class evaluations, course evaluations, I can sometimes delay reading those I've never gotten nasty negative reviews, but I still am sometimes there's a knot in my stomach that is like, the class can be over and it'll take me two to three months to even sit down and read it and go through it because I'm just concerned that at any moment, this is where the imposter syndrome and all of that resides.

Substructure 6: Validation Through Recognition

This substructure represented moments when external acknowledgment, such as awards, tenure progress, or student appreciation, temporarily alleviated IS. Recognition from others served as an important yet fragile source of affirmation of competence. Recognition and validation from external sources provided corrective evidence that helped participants counter feelings of IS. Awards, fellowships, professional opportunities, and student nominations were described as tangible markers of achievement that stood in contrast to internal doubt. Such acknowledgments from colleagues, institutions, and broader academic communities offered reassurance that their contributions were valued and that they belonged in the profession.

P3 reported:

I had gotten some really inappropriate feedback from folks in my department about work that I was doing about anti-Black racism. And at first, I kind of was like, wow, this is messed up. I started second guessing the work I was doing, but then I got invited to present it at another school and received rave reviews about

the work. And they were just like, we need this, needs to be here. Like, this is great.

P4 reported:

I've won a lot of prestigious awards. I've done stuff like that where people have acknowledged my achievements and acknowledged the work that I do. Again, I'm a person that don't do any of this for that, but it still means something when it happens. So, you still always want to be acknowledged for the work that you've done. And just recently, I've been put on a board of trustees for my community college that I came from. And to me, that was a huge achievement because that's a big deal. Like they trust my judgment, they trust my experience. And for me to be seated in that was, that was a big deal.

P5 reported:

And so, my competence got me the grant, my ability to leverage my knowledge, my expertise, my research helped me move mountains and without the support of the College of Education, I was actually able to earn the first year of university nomination for service. At the university award and I was the runner up and that was like university wide.

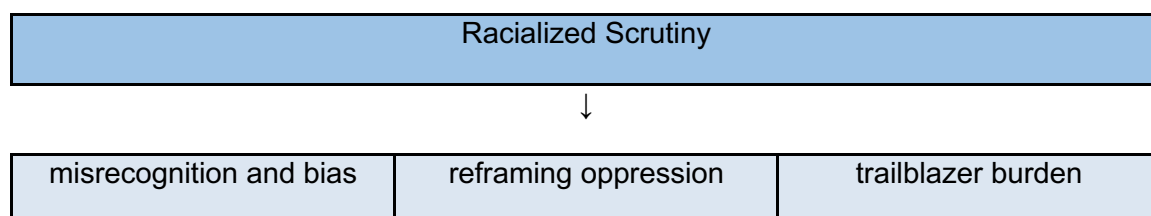
P8 reported:

This was about three years ago where I started with this university, brand spanking new. I was able to come in and they asked me to be on the curricular committee. This was a new course that they were offering. They were building out and I had several years of marketing experience. So, they asked me to help

build out the curriculum. So, all of the course objectives and whatnot. So just being able to sit amongst people that have been doing it for quite some time, and I'm brand spanking new to building out courses, I felt like it was a great experience for me to learn from the legacy history in the room for people that have been doing it for so long. And they allowed me to bring my new and fresh ideals into that building out that course and to be able to roll it out and have my name attached to it as instructor credits was like really big for me.

Figure 4

Overarching Structures and Substructures for Racialized Scrutiny



Overarching Structure 3: Racialized Scrutiny

Racialized scrutiny encompassed the heightened visibility and judgment participants experienced due to their race and gender. Participants often felt they were being watched, evaluated, or tokenized in ways that White colleagues were not. Subtle and overt microaggressions, including biased student evaluations, disproportionate service requests, and assumptions of incompetence, reinforced feelings of being outsiders in predominantly White institutions. This constant monitoring shaped their professional identities and emotional well-being, turning routine academic interactions into racialized encounters that reaffirmed systemic inequities.

P4 reported:

And so, there are some spaces that I go into that I have to fight, and I know I have to fight. I don't think it's that they don't have respect for me. I think academia is this world of like competition in some sorts and they want to, claim everything for themselves. And so, they struggle when people are smarter than them, wiser than them, or got more experience with them.

Substructure 7: Misrecognition and Bias

This substructure encompassed experiences of being underestimated, stereotyped, or mistaken for staff or students. Participants discussed how racialized assumptions about intelligence or authority undermined their confidence and reinforced IS. Participants described consistent experiences of racialized invalidation in their academic environments. These experiences included being mistaken for students, having Afrocentric or cultural expression policed, and being confined to race-related expertise regardless of broader scholarly credentials. Such invalidation undermined their authority in classrooms, faculty meetings, and professional contexts, often fueling IS and reinforcing feelings of not fully belonging in academia. Importantly, these instances were not isolated; participants indicated that the invalidation was repetitive, embedded in institutional cultures, and cumulative in its impact.

P2 reported:

Oh, I question my competence. Every day, and it's usually because of the microaggressions, or because of them asking, are you sure, and how do you know,

and where is the proof, and if I've lived this for the last umpteen years of my life, then wisdom and experience is absolutely a resource.

P4 reported:

I think also we are the only ones who have to water down who they are for people to give us what they think we deserve. And I'm just so bothered by that. And so, I think that being a Black woman is everything about my experience, everything. I don't think there's any room I've entered, any experience that I've had that has not been at the top of the list to influence it, especially the way that I show up. I'm going to come with my big earrings. I'm going to come with my lipstick, my nails, my locs. And so, you know, the more that you show up as who you are, I think the more challenges it's always been.

P5 reported:

And I always say it's sad, but as a minority faculty member, I've had to work two and three times harder to get less credits than they're getting. I've had to publish, I'm currently, probably like 30 publications, and I've been told it's not enough because I don't have a top tier journal in the last two years. I have some, just not in the last two years, right before I go out for tenure. But I've also encountered weird things. Like I had a graduate assistant who was an older gentleman, and we went to like a conference, and we submitted a paper. And even though my name was first when it came out, they put his name first. I was the professor with the PhD. He was the student in doc program. And in the program and in the presentation, his name always comes first. I've done publications where I have put

his name first and my name second, they'll get accepted. I put my name first, it's hyphenated, and I put his name second, we get rejected. And so, I don't think academia, because we're such a small percentage, recognizes some of those silent barriers that there's not enough of us to publish about to make it a conversational piece, but they do exist.

P6 reported:

And I've been mistaken for students, in like some of the most rude ways, not a gentle or a kind, like, hey, are you looking for a class? Or like, hey, you need help with X, Y, Z. It's like, are you supposed to be in here? This is the faculty lounge.

P8 reported:

I did have a student that really tried to run a lot of game on me. And because my profile picture is out there, I'm pretty sure he saw that I was a Black woman and he thought that he could just talk to me any kind of way and, run game. He was consistently turning in late assignments, missing discussion posts. I like to give grace, you can use me, but don't abuse me. So, if you need some extra time, go ahead, do your discussion post and I'll grade it, but I have to mark it down. The first time I gave him some grace, and I didn't mark it down, but come on, you're only like your fifth time. I got to mark you down. Because you're missing so much, you're constantly being marked down. He's failing at this point. So, he sent me an email. And when I tell you that email was the most ridiculous thing, he questioned my professionalism as a woman. And I'm like, as a woman, you're a

male. What are you talking about? And I equated that to as a Black woman. And he told me, you wouldn't understand.

P11 reported:

In the spring of 24, I think it was. I launched a new study. I was advised to not produce anything off of that study, like no publications, no conference presentations until after I secure a tenure. So that it wouldn't necessarily be on record that that's what I'm looking at right now. I was advised to not produce any manuscripts to not submit any conference abstracts and things of that nature to basically not be public with the work that I was doing.

Substructure 8: Reframing Oppression

This substructure reflected participants' efforts to reinterpret negative racialized experiences as motivation for advocacy, mentorship, or scholarly focus. By reframing oppression, they reclaimed agency and turned marginalization into empowerment.

Several participants actively resisted deficit-based interpretations of their experiences in academia. Instead of internalizing exclusionary treatment as an indicator of personal inadequacy, they reframed these challenges as evidence of systemic inequities deeply embedded in higher education. This reframing allowed them to preserve self-worth, maintain confidence in their scholarly capabilities, and push back against the internalization of imposter-related doubts. By shifting the focus from individual shortcomings to structural barriers, participants cultivated resilience and developed strategies to sustain their academic presence despite institutional hostility. Importantly,

this reframing was not a passive stance but an intentional act of resistance against marginalization that positioned them as agents rather than victims.

P1 reported:

My shining seems to blind others. My colleagues, or my so-called leaders in this work. So, the more popular I am with my scholars that I'm teaching it appears the more threatening I am to others. And so sometimes the question comes, well, do I need to fall back? Do I need to, you know, scale it down? Because, you know, I want to remain employed? But at my big age, I have decided that I will not dull my shine or dim my shimmer because of someone else's insecurities.

P4 reported:

So, when I first got into higher education and I started seeing a lot of the inequities and seeing how students were being treated and how faculty and staff of color were being treated, I was pissed. I was always very angry. And so, every chance I got, I let people know how mad I was. This isn't right. This isn't fair. But what I lacked was language. I won't say I lacked the education, but I lacked the language that they speak in higher ed. And so, what I realized was my anger allowed them to just say, oh, there she go, another angry Black woman. So, they were able to dismiss what I was saying and put me in this bubble of, there go another angry Black woman. So, I had to learn the game. So it wasn't that my anger changed, my language changed, my knowledge changed, my education changed. And so, for me, I had to equip myself in a way to where I could speak

their language but also express my disagreements and the things that needed to change.

P9 reported:

So, if other people came with biases, you could impact someone's career if you didn't like them because they were Black. So being African American too, you have to kind of know how to shift these conversations. I was in a role that I knew based on just observations and hearing things that these people can sabotage other races if they knew up front. So, I was in a role where I could mask that information because you don't know if, John Brown is White or Black unless you saw a race on his application. So, I would take all the racial information off the applications because they would have to review them for admission. But I was like, some stuff they don't need to know. They don't need to know if this is male or female and they don't need to know what their race is because all you need to see is their academic record. That's it.

P10 reported:

I can be a petty person. And just knowing that, it's going to bug someone that I'm doing this well is a motivator. And so, yeah, maybe I do. But I think that also trying not to care what they think, because the reason I got into what I'm doing is to help my community or to do research that helps the community that I'm working with. And so, it really doesn't matter what that person thinks about me if I'm actually doing that thing.

Substructure 9: Trailblazer Burden

This substructure referred to the emotional weight of being ‘the first’ or ‘only’ woman of color in a department. Participants felt both pride and exhaustion from carrying the unspoken responsibility of representing their race and gender while paving the way for others. Participants carried the burden of being the first or only woman of color in their departments. Leadership visibility was both validating and exhausting, as it came with expectations to represent their entire racial or gender group.

P3 reported:

I would say probably the biggest one is just as a result of race and gender feeling very like, okay, I'm the only one, like I'm isolated. And then feeling like, because of that, questioning, can I access the support that I would need? Like knowing that I need these things if I want to do well, and if I want to do well without pulling my hair out, not like implode my life to succeed. And the added stress of just knowing it's like, well, I don't know, like how in the world am I going to put these things together to make it happen?

P6 reported:

And so, I want to see more of us in those spaces. And I want to see us benefiting from the spaces that we help create. And from K-12 education to higher education, Black women have been the thing that's needed for these things to be sustainable. And I want us to start reaping the benefits of that. Because like, we are needed in these spaces, we are needed for cultural nuance, we are needed for holistic understanding. We're needed in research. We're needed in teaching. Yeah,

like all aspects of higher education, we are needed. And the only way that we can see more of us doing it is if we stop gatekeeping once we get to a certain point. I don't consider myself somebody who's made it, but I feel like I'm high enough now. I'm high enough in the academic rank now that I can start pulling people up. Like I think I've got a point now that I know enough information that I can start giving that information out.

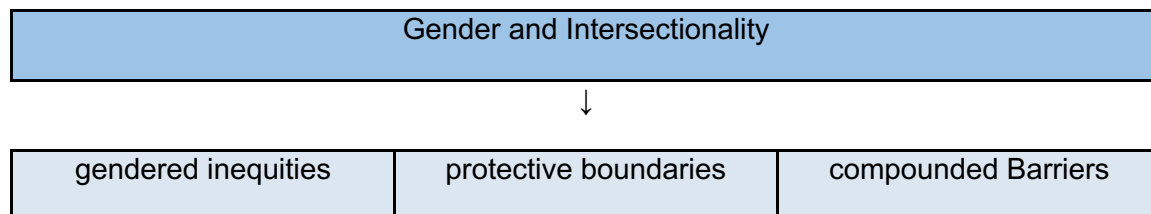
P8 reported:

I just think that educating and helping each other is how we continue to keep that glass ceiling open for us so that we don't keep bumping our heads, so it's, reach one, teach one, so I always liked when I go up a level, I always try to look back to see who I can grab and bring up with me.

P10 reported: "I am the first Latina to ever be hired as a tenure track faculty member in this specific program, not even just my department. The oldest undergraduate department in the country. It's like 85 years old."

P11 reported:

So, when I get tenured, in the next four to five months, I will be only the third Black woman to be tenured in this program. Now, our program is 75 years old. So, in 75 years, only three Black women will have made it through the process.

Figure 5*Overarching Structures and Substructures for Gender and Intersectionality***Overarching Structure 4: Gender and Intersectionality**

Gender and intersectionality captured the compounded challenges faced by participants navigating overlapping systems of sexism, racism, and class bias within academia. Their narratives illustrated how expectations tied to gender roles, such as nurturing behaviors, emotional labor, and appearance norms, interacted with racial stereotypes to produce unique forms of marginalization. Participants described the emotional and professional toll of being both hypervisible and undervalued, often balancing care work with the need to assert authority in male-dominated spaces. This structure highlights how gender and race intersect to intensify IS and workplace inequities.

P3 reported:

On one hand, you know, I'm Black, I'm African American Black. I was raised somewhere that was very White, but it was like very poor as well. And I was taught extremely early that people are going to have a problem with you because you are Black. People are going to discredit your accomplishments because you are Black. I had experience with it nice and early.

P4 reported:

Because my research focuses on the experiences of Black women, faculty at private PWIs. And, you know, when you start talking about race, when you start talking about equity, inclusion, those are like buzzwords now when people start to kind of tune out depending on who you're talking to.

Substructure 10: Gendered Inequities

This substructure highlighted the unequal distribution of workload, pay, and promotion opportunities rooted in gender bias. Participants described being expected to provide emotional labor or diversity service that was unrecognized in evaluation systems. Gender bias shaped imposter experiences through appearance-based judgments, patriarchal silencing, and unequal workload distribution. These inequities created additional obstacles for WOC in academia.

P6 reported:

Being a Black woman in academia means that my race and gender are always intertwined in how I'm perceived and treated. There are moments when I walk into spaces and I don't see anyone who looks like me, and that lack of representation makes imposter syndrome hit harder. People question my expertise more, especially after I earned my doctorate, and it often feels like I have to prove myself twice over. So much of my experience has been about having to assert that I belong, that I am the expert, and that this space is mine too. I just think for Black women, it hit different. I think, because we are not taught to take ownership of the world. We're automatically seeing that we don't belong in spaces and the racism

and the sexism that we experience in these spaces, they affirm that thought. Do White women experience sexism? Yes. But at the end of the day, if they had to choose me or a White woman, to protect and defend, most of the time they're choosing the White woman. And so, there is not an affirmation of the imposter syndrome thoughts and the thoughts of not belonging. They're not affirmed with the behaviors that we see within the workplace by racism and sexism.

P10 reported:

I have kind of an issue with one of my colleagues right now at work, someone who I was supposed to be collaborating with who like a couple of summers ago, we were working on this grant and there were literally 2 emails that I didn't reply to during the summer when I'm not getting paid. And he went straight to the senior associate dean of research to complain. They sent me this letter saying that I had to do all of these things. Like if I got an email, reply within 24 hours and all this other stuff. And I was like, no. And so, I replied with my own stuff, put in complaints and stuff. But that's been really difficult, and it's been dragging on for a really long time.

P11 reported:

I think one of the things is, and I don't know, because I only know my own experiences, but I feel like appearance comes up a lot in my world as a faculty member. And I found it interesting that people are so comfortable always commenting on how I look. And I don't know if my male counterparts experienced that.

P4 reported:

And so, I will say that women who are in higher positions in my institution, they are literally some of the hardest working women I know. And they're not Black. So, I do think that women, in general, are forced to be better and do better." I also feel it's important to note that Black men in these institutions. The charmers, they live a totally different life than we do too. Because if you are a charming Black man with a little ounce of attractiveness, these White people treat you very differently. Very differently. You get to move right along with them, more than likely with a White woman on your side, and flow through life very well.

P1 reported: "And when I do use my title in certain scenarios, it's almost like it's met with this immediate resistance. Especially from White men. They become hostile. It's almost like they expect to get met with hostility."

P3 reported:

If anything, I get treated as like, almost like masculinized and like, I usually get called intimidating. Like White women tend to be more reactive in a negative way to me than White men. Even White men seem like comfortable half the time in academic settings engaging with me. Whenever I've been in settings that are just for faculty and grads of color, I have had nonstop incidences of kind of like this assumption that it's like, oh, well, you're Black, you're female. You're clearly fair game for dating.

Substructure 11: Protective Boundaries

This substructure described how participants developed strategies to shield themselves from discriminatory environments—limiting emotional exposure, declining token diversity invitations, or disengaging from draining committee work to preserve mental health. Participants described the necessity of setting firm professional boundaries as a means of resisting inequitable expectations within academia. Many WOC professors reported that they were often cast into caretaker roles by colleagues, students, and institutions, roles that assumed they would provide emotional labor, mentorship, or service work in disproportionate amounts compared to their peers. This expectation, while framed as ‘nurturing’ or ‘supportive,’ was experienced as a burden that undermined their professional identity and reinforced IS when research and scholarship were devalued in comparison.

To protect their well-being and preserve their professional agency, participants actively established boundaries. This included declining excessive service requests, refusing to internalize others’ assumptions about their roles, and redefining their responsibilities in ways that safeguarded time for research and self-care. For many, boundary-setting was not simply an act of self-protection but a survival strategy that ensured longevity in the profession.

P1 reported:

I think it just goes back to those societal factors that Black women are the fixers and the cleanup. They don't listen to us on the front end but expect us to come and Olivia Pope the situation on the back end. I don't know if it's imposter syndrome.

When you just don't want to be used that way. Because, you know, you get tired. You get tired of being not honored. For your expertise and your knowledge, but then, again, when it goes wrong, then they don't want you to have the joy in saying I told you so.

P6 reported:

When they choose to believe that I belong in spaces it's to be the spokesperson for Black people. And me having to tell them; well, Google is a free application that we all can look. Let's all Google it together and see what the overwhelming majority of Black people feel. We don't have to call on me as the representation. Thank God that we have so many other applications that we could go to for that representation. Like, you don't need me to do it for you.

P11 reported:

I purposefully don't wear suits on interviews, and I tell everybody I recognize that's not comfortable for everybody. It's not even safe. That's a risk that I'm taking. But I refuse to put a suit on because when people from the UAE or wherever come, they don't have to put suits on. They have their hair wraps and turbans on and whatever. And because they got money and power, we don't tell them they first need to stop by Brooks Brothers and put a suit on. They come in their traditional gear. So, I'm taking that stand in my own way as well, because I can back it up.

Substructure 12: Compounded Barriers

This substructure illustrated how overlapping systems of race and gender intensified professional challenges. Participants faced multiple layers of bias simultaneously, creating a cumulative disadvantage that deepened imposter feelings. The intersection of race and gender created compounded barriers for participants, intensifying IS experiences. Unlike instances where race or gender bias was experienced in isolation, these participants described how both identities worked in tandem to undermine their authority and expertise in academic spaces. They were frequently misrecognized, mistaken for students rather than professors, or assumed to be less authoritative because of their appearance. These stereotypes not only diminished their credibility but also added a continuous layer of emotional labor as they worked to prove that they belonged in their roles.

P2 reported:

First of all, there is no Dr. So-and-so. It's always first-name basis. And that's mostly in every White institution I've ever worked in; it's been that way. And so, for me, I came in knowing that, and I refuse to go into that, don't call me by my first name. My name is Dr. So-and-so. I have earned this right.

P3 reported:

I think the only thing I would add for the intersection of race and gender there is just that all of that is filtered through the lens of I'm a Black woman. They already act like they think I'm incompetent. I'm like, you think I'm incompetent because you don't understand the work I do. That's the issue here. And with that being the

case, it's like, I feel like, again, it's imposterization. I didn't doubt myself, y'all, making me question whether you're gonna get in the way of what I'm trying to do. I'm constantly having to calculate out like, well, okay, if they already got attitude with me, how much can I afford?

P5 reported:

I was actually able to earn the first year of university nomination for service. At the university award and I was the runner up and that was like university wide. It wasn't like department wide, which is why it was impactful, and it reassured me when I had imposter syndrome that I wasn't all of these things that people were putting their stereotypes on me like where did this brown girl come from? Like she was just supposed to fill a demographic because this was pre-current presidential. And you know, you're supposed to just be grateful to have been hired. And I was later told that I missed the memo that if you are a minority, you needed to succumb to the seven years of silence. You just do as you're told.

P6 reported: "I got people outright refuse to call me doctor after I've made the acknowledgement that it's doctor. They'll still walk up to you and say like, my first name. And it's like we've been down this road."

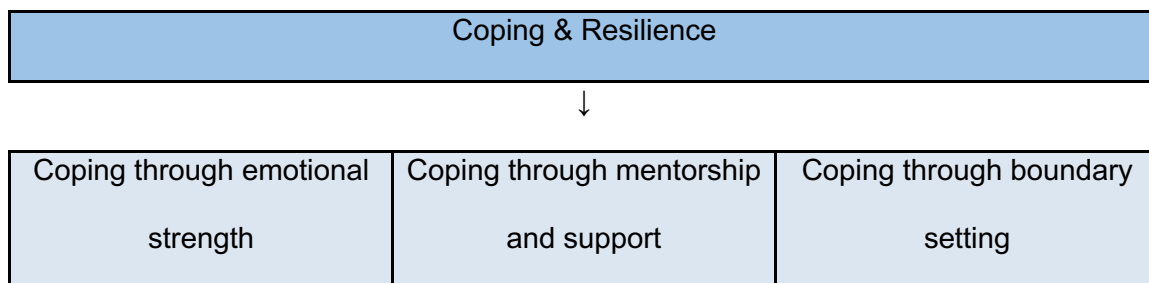
P9 reported:

First day when you send out your emails, when you meet with your faculty, when you meet with your students, you tell them day one exactly who you are and how you want to be addressed. And then you don't respond to anything else.

Somebody sent me a, hey, called me by my first name email. I'm like, I know they're not talking to me, not in academia.

Figure 6

Overarching Structures and Substructures for Coping



Overarching Structure 5: Coping and Resilience

Coping and resilience represented the psychological strategies participants employed to manage IS and systemic barriers. WOC professors drew strength from community support, mentorship, faith, and self-affirmation practices. Many reframed adversity as motivation to excel and to serve as role models for other marginalized scholars. Through setting boundaries, seeking validation from trusted networks, and embracing authenticity, participants transformed coping into a form of resistance and empowerment. This structure illustrates how resilience enabled participants to maintain their commitment to academia despite persistent doubts and discrimination.

P1 reported:

I feel like God is going to place me wherever I need to be. I don't go chasing, because the Word says, surely goodness and mercy will follow me, so that means that if I'm chasing it, I'm behind it, so I don't really do all that.

P3 reported:

I participated in the National Center for Faculty Diversity and Development. Like their online tools were helpful. Like they had this mentor map that was like superiorly helpful that kind of forced me to like acknowledge, well, like, okay, you need to have mentors in these different areas. Where are the blanks in your map? You have to go find people to put in this blank. You have no choice to do that.

Substructure 13: Coping Through Emotional Strength

This substructure represented participants' reliance on internal fortitude, faith, and perseverance to navigate adversity. Emotional regulation and self-affirmation served as protective mechanisms against chronic self-doubt. Participants described drawing on emotional resilience, self-affirmation, and faith to combat IS and navigate academic stress. For some, this meant deliberately reminding themselves of their accomplishments, while for others, spiritual practices and positive self-talk helped them push forward in moments of doubt. These strategies provided grounding and became essential tools in sustaining motivation despite systemic and personal challenges.

P4 reported:

I think I choose to be like a barrier breaker. So, at this point, even in the spaces that I know will feel very scary and feel like it will be hard for me to sit at that table or to be a part of that conversation. I think I'm still going to test it because I want to make it easier for the next person. I don't want it to be as hard for someone else to reach that space. So, I think it influences me to continue to want

to change the experiences of others and to break down those barriers for them, even if it causes a few bruises for me, just because I think it's so funny.

P6 reported:

Being intentional about changing the narrative behind what people, even what Black people, feel about themselves when they enter into spaces. Like, no, those spaces weren't meant for me, or they weren't built with me in mind, that does not mean that we don't deserve success there. So, it just makes me very intentional about providing the tools, the resources, the skills that are necessary to get people to and through that space.

P7 reported:

Self-affirmation is the first one I go to. I look at myself and I say, I can do this. I write little notes on pads, and I stick them in my Bible, and I date them. Especially just recently here, when I told you that I didn't have the decision to make, it wasn't my decision because I got so crazy about it. I got my green Bible out and it was stuffed with notes to myself. And I read all those notes. They had like maybe 10 years' worth of notes in there. And I was reading from the first note, and I just started laughing because I'm like, look at where I was 10 years ago. Look at what I prayed for 10 years ago. Wow. And look where I am now.

P9 reported:

I own this PhD. I worked hard for this. I went to school back to get my PhD when I was 50 years old. I thought, this is going to be a piece of cake. I'm going to do this in two years and be done. They almost killed the sister doing this. It took me

four years to get finished. And it was some labor work involved. And so, I don't take that for granted, that's what gives me the incentive not to get waylaid by this imposter syndrome.

Substructure 14: Coping Through Mentorship and Support

This substructure captured the value of formal and informal mentoring relationships in mitigating IS. Participants emphasized how guidance from other WOC fostered belonging, confidence, and professional growth. Mentorship and supportive relationships emerged as critical protective factors against imposter thoughts. Several participants emphasized how encouragement from deans, colleagues, and peers provided reassurance that they belonged in academic spaces. These forms of backing helped participants step into leadership roles they might otherwise have doubted themselves capable of.

P4 reported:

I'm not a person that feels like I need everybody to be on my team. Like, I'm a small circle kind of person. And so as long as I have my handful of folks that I know will ride for me, then I can handle everything else that's happening within the place. But I do fortunately have that. I have my, best friends also work at the institution and we kind of grew up in this institution together. They are Black women, but I also have some great White colleagues that I've been able to depend on in many ways, which I think you need. Like you need some folks that's on all sides because me and my Black friends can relate on the struggles and the challenges of just being Black women in this profession. But also, my White

colleagues that I've been able to call on and depend on, they've also recognized the challenges of being a Black woman in this profession and have listened and been willing to intercede and be that door that they're like, wait a minute, now she was trying to say something. I want to hear what she had to say.

P6 reported:

I guess my supervisor, even going back my initial interview, I was terrified. When I first started teaching, I didn't have my doctorate yet. I had my master's degree, and I had just got my master's degree. And so, I was extremely, extremely terrified for the interview. And she sat me down and she calmed me down. And she literally helped me through the interview. Every time she felt like I was overthinking or anything like that, she stopped me. And she was like, you know exactly what you know. Be confident in what it is that you know and the experiences that you have that can contribute. Stop overthinking it. I'm not looking for like scientific answers. So, from that moment on, she's been a very huge supporter of me.

P7 reported:

The positive, and I must say positive when talking about imposter syndrome, has been the mentorship and the backing that I have from our dean. When she put me in certain spaces. She came to check on me and came to my office. She came to sit down with me and say, hey, you know, I put you here because I know that you can do it. I don't think that you can do it. I know you can do this. Just let me know what you need. I'm here. I'm backing you up. That was the most positive

thing I had dealing with imposter syndrome because before I'm like, are you kidding me? You want me to be an associate dean? What? You know, I don't know whether I can do this, but I had so much support from her and other colleagues that, and if you don't have that support, you're out there by yourself. And the imposter syndrome will fester. It'll get bigger and bigger and bigger.

P10 reported:

And so, part of why I've still been able to, I feel, be pretty successful in my role as both a researcher and an educator here is because I do have those supportive colleagues. The chair of my department is very supportive. She's actually the chair of my tenure committee and all of the other professors I've have very good relationships with. And so that's been, I think, very important to me to still be able to do the things I need to do. And then the students are amazing. I have really incredible students.

P11 reported:

I think a year ago now, I wrote an article with a colleague. She's a senior to me. She's a full professor now. And so, this is the person when I came to this institution for my campus visit who picked me up from the airport. From the time I got off of that airplane until forever, she's just been transparent. She's been vulnerable. She's been supportive. She's challenged me. She's done all these things. Whereas I feel like if she were not here, I probably wouldn't still be here because I'm absolutely swimming against the stream with the work that I'm doing. And she immediately invited me into her fold, like, here's some manuscripts we

can work on together. Here's a grant I want you to hop on with me. And so, mentorship is wonderful in all the many ways that it exists.

P5 reported:

I created my own circle, sister circle. I created a sister circle, and I took the breadcrumbs that I learned, and I have put them into play. And while there's no one from my institution that's part of my circle, I think over time it's going to be the most successful thing that I was able to do to crush imposter syndrome, to not be in a crab pot, but instead to elevate others and empower them to be just as successful. So, I have mentored students from other colleges and universities.

P1 reported:

When we're in affinity groups, we all feel it, and we're determined to stay. Despite those feelings of inadequacy, we kind of band together and say, you know what, yeah, we are here. So those affinity spaces are very helpful when you're able to, converse with other Black women in your similar situation, and tell the stories of when things are happening, that no, we do belong in this space. So that, that helps to have those. So, when you spoke about support, it is usually from those infinity spaces.

Substructure 15: Coping Through Boundary-Setting

This substructure encompassed the conscious decision to limit overwork and emotional labor. Participants described learning to say no, prioritize self-care, and redefine success on their own terms—actions that restored autonomy and reduced burnout. By refusing to overextend themselves or accept roles that were solely rooted in

caretaking, they reclaimed their agency and safeguarded their professional well-being. Boundary-setting helped participants protect their time, energy, and intellectual identity in spaces where systemic inequities demanded more of them.

P1 reported:

So, right now, I think my imposter syndrome is that I don't I want to, like, seek tenure or leadership in higher ed. it's not that I don't feel like I can do it, I don't trust myself enough to be able to take the blows that will come with being a Black woman in higher ed leadership. Especially with this current administration. I don't feel like I'm equipped for that. Skills-wise, yes. Personality, temperament-wise? Yeah, I think I would turn into that angry Black woman. I feel like that will give them a cause to say; I told you she couldn't do it anyway.

P3 reported: "I have had a pretty heavy-duty policy of compartmentalizing my home life versus my work life. And sometimes I move the needle a little bit."

P2 reported:

I will say that I submitted my resignation because the work that wasn't on the job description was too much. That little line that comes at the end, and especially in higher education, there's usually that last line that says, other duties as necessary. And that line is going to kill a whole host of folk. It affected me in such a way where I, along with my therapist, decided that I needed to choose me. And in order to choose me, I couldn't do it, bound by someone else's expectations and lack of support.

P11 reported:

And so, one of the things I often think about is I did a lot of volunteer work around diversity issues, and I was not compensated for it. So, I've been very intentional here. Like I've never been on our diversity committee. Most anything that has the words diversity and stuff like that in it, I don't do that in like a formal capacity because I also don't want to get pigeonholed and boxed in. And that has, in my opinion, served me well as we look at the way that DEI is under attack right now.

Summary

This chapter presented the results of this phenomenological study that explored the lived experiences and meaning of IS among WOC professors in higher education. The purpose of the study was to understand how IS manifests in the professional and personal experiences of WOC professors and how intersecting identities, institutional structures, and coping strategies shape those experiences. Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method was used to analyze data from semistructured interviews with twelve participants representing diverse disciplines, faculty ranks, and institutional contexts.

The findings revealed that IS among WOC professors are complex, relational, and rooted in systemic inequities rather than individual deficiencies. Participants' narratives produced five overarching psychological structures: autonomy, competence, racialized scrutiny, gender and intersectionality, and coping and resilience, which were further expressed through 15 substructures.

Under autonomy, participants described the fulfillment that came from professional satisfaction and freedom in course design, which was contrasted with

restricted decision-making and work–life strain shaped by institutional control and personal responsibilities. Within competence, participants experienced both teaching strength and validation through recognition, yet continued to struggle with research insecurity, especially when engaging in race-related scholarship. The theme of racialized scrutiny highlighted how microaggressions, bias, and misrecognition undermined belonging, while participants simultaneously reframed oppression and carried the trailblazer burden of representing their racial and gender groups. The structure of gender and intersectionality revealed ongoing gendered inequities, the necessity of protective boundaries, and compounded barriers at the intersection of race and gender. Finally, coping and resilience encompassed strategies of emotional strength, mentorship and peer support, and boundary-setting, which enabled participants to sustain their academic presence and protect their well-being.

Collectively, these findings answered the research question by illustrating that IS among WOC professors is not merely an internal psychological experience, but a phenomenon embedded within institutional cultures, power dynamics, and intersecting systems of oppression. Imposter feelings were simultaneously resisted, reframed, and managed through community, spirituality, and acts of agency.

In Chapter 5, these findings are interpreted in relation to the conceptual framework and prior literature presented in Chapter 2. The next chapter discusses how these results confirm, challenge, or extend existing literature on IS, identity, and equity in academia. Chapter 5 also outlines the study's limitations, provides recommendations for

future research, and highlights implications for practice and positive social change in higher education environments that seek to support WOC faculty.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the meaning of IS among WOC professors in higher education. This study was needed because the phenomenon of IS among WOC in academic settings has not been fully examined in the literature. Although IS has been widely studied among general populations and women faculty, limited research has centered on how intersecting identities of race and gender uniquely shape these experiences for WOC professors. Historically, WOC have faced structural inequities within academia, including racialized scrutiny, gender bias, and unequal access to research and mentorship opportunities, which collectively contribute to imposter experiences (Cokley et al., 2017; Freeman et al., 2019; Parkman, 2016). However, the intersection of these inequities with psychological needs related to autonomy, competence, and belonging has not been sufficiently understood. To address this gap, this study utilized Giorgi's (2009) descriptive phenomenological method to uncover the psychological meaning and essence of IS among twelve WOC professors.

Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) provides a framework for examining how autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs are supported or prevented within academic environments. These psychological needs are essential for fostering intrinsic motivation and well-being, yet WOC professors often experience barriers that undermine these needs. In contrast, intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) illuminates how overlapping systems of race and gender oppression structure these experiences, emphasizing that IS cannot be separated from broader institutional inequities. Together,

these theories offer a multidimensional perspective on understanding the interplay between personal motivation and systemic oppression in higher education settings. Participants were recruited from various institutional types, ranks, and disciplines. Semistructured interviews were conducted via secure Zoom meetings, recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim to capture rich, detailed descriptions of their lived experiences. Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological approach was employed to transform the transcripts into meaning units, which were then organized into 15 substructures across five overarching structures: autonomy, competence, racialized scrutiny, gender and intersectionality, and coping/resilience.

The research design supported the exploration of how IS manifests and evolves within the professional and personal lives of WOC professors. Data were analyzed to uncover both the external institutional factors and internal psychological processes contributing to IS. The key findings revealed that participants experienced IS not as isolated self-doubt but as responses to systemic inequities within academic environments.

Participants reported that autonomy was empowering when institutions valued their independence and teaching creativity. However, restrictive policies, limited voice in decision-making, and overextended service demands often undermined their sense of control. Competence emerged as multifaceted, while teaching success and student validation strengthened confidence; research-related insecurity, particularly around race-focused topics, triggered imposter thoughts. Participants described racialized scrutiny and microaggressions as persistent challenges, noting that their expertise was often questioned, and their legitimacy as scholars was undermined. At the intersection of race

and gender, participants encountered appearance-based judgments, patriarchal silencing, and unequal workloads that compounded barriers to advancement.

Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated remarkable resilience. They employed coping strategies such as mentorship, faith, peer collaboration, and boundary setting to maintain their psychological well-being and reclaim their professional agency. Recognition from students, peers, and external professional communities helped participants counter internalized doubt and validate their sense of belonging in academia. Collectively, the findings suggest that IS in WOC professors is a socio-structural phenomenon that is rooted in the institutional environment.

Interpretation of the Findings

The study's findings both confirmed and extended prior literature on IS and WOC in academia. Consistent with earlier research (Ahmed et al., 2020; Cokley et al., 2017; Parkman, 2016), participants experienced IS as intertwined with systemic inequities. However, the results expanded the understanding of IS by showing that imposterism is not merely a cognitive distortion but a relational response to environments that repeatedly question women's legitimacy and authority.

Autonomy aligned closely with SDT's emphasis on the human need for self-direction and agency (Ryan & Deci, 2000). When participants exercised freedom in course creation and decision-making, they experienced intrinsic motivation and professional satisfaction. However, institutional policies that imposed rigid curricula or micromanagement undermined autonomy, fostering frustration and self-doubt. This finding confirmed previous literature indicating that autonomy-supportive environments

enhance intrinsic motivation and well-being (Domenico & Ryan, 2017). It extended this to show how systemic racism and gender bias erode academic autonomy for WOC professors.

The structure of competence revealed both mastery and insecurity. Participants felt validated through their teaching effectiveness, echoing research that suggests mastery experiences strengthen competence (Clance & Imes, 1978; Feenstra et al., 2020); however, research-related anxiety and the pressure to publish reinforced imposter feelings. From an SDT perspective, unmet needs for competence led to reduced intrinsic motivation. Intersectionality theory further explained that competence was evaluated through racialized and gendered lenses, meaning WOC professors' expertise was often doubted despite evidence of their success.

Racialized scrutiny illuminated how systemic racism perpetuated IS. Participants described being mistaken for students, silenced during meetings, or tokenized in discussions about diversity. These findings affirmed prior studies showing that WOC experience hypervisibility and invisibility simultaneously (Jackson et al., 2022; Wilkins-Yel et al., 2018). Through the lens of intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991), these experiences revealed how institutional cultures reproduce racial and gender hierarchies, which continually challenge WOC's legitimacy and belonging. This study extended the literature by demonstrating how these patterns actively trigger imposter feelings even among highly accomplished faculty.

Gender and intersectionality further shaped IS. Participants reported experiencing appearance-based judgments, unequal workloads, and patriarchal silencing, confirming

the findings of Banaji et al. (2021) and Godsil et al. (2016). Their narratives demonstrated how sexism and racism interact to create compounded barriers to professional advancement (Crenshaw, 1989). By asserting professional boundaries and rejecting caretaker-only roles, participants resisted gendered expectations, illustrating agency and resilience in line with SDT's principle of autonomy. This dual lens revealed that empowerment required both institutional reform and self-determined action.

Coping and resilience strategies were consistent with SDT's concept of relatedness; the need for meaningful connection and social belonging (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Mentorship, faith, and peer networks provided psychological safety and validation, counteracting imposter feelings. These findings supported Fields and Cunningham-Williams (2021) and Priddie et al. (2022) who emphasized the role of mentorship and community in mitigating IS among WOC. Thus, intrinsic motivation was restored when participants felt supported and valued within professional relationships.

Autonomy

The overarching structure of autonomy captured how WOC professors sought freedom and self-determination within their professional roles. Participants described autonomy as essential for expressing authenticity and authority, yet it was often negotiated within constraining institutional hierarchies. Autonomy both affirmed their expertise and exposed points of vulnerability when decision-making power was curtailed. Within the framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), autonomy represented a critical need linked to motivation and well-being. The following substructures — professional satisfaction, restricted decision-making, and work–life strain — illustrate

how participants experienced varying degrees of control and constraint in their academic environments.

The autonomy structure encompassed professional satisfaction, restricted decision-making, and work–life strain. Collectively, these findings confirmed Ryan and Deci’s (2000) proposition that autonomy is a central psychological need influencing intrinsic motivation and well-being. Participants who experienced decision-making freedom reported greater fulfillment, whereas those with constrained autonomy reported emotional exhaustion and diminished motivation. This pattern aligned with Griffin (2020) and Priddie et al. (2022), who noted that WOC faculty thrive when their expertise and pedagogical style are respected. From an intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1989), autonomy was not merely professional control but an act of resistance within racialized and gendered institutions. Overall, autonomy was both a marker of empowerment and a reflection of the structural inequities shaping the motivation of WOC professors.

P10 reported:

I teach about homelessness. And so, and up to very recently, I had felt pretty okay. Like I could decide what I was going to teach, what I was going to talk about. And even though it hasn't been directly communicated that I can't talk about certain things or that I shouldn't, the vibe around the department and the college is like, hey, we're trying to be careful. And so, I actually asked if I could take a break from teaching that class.

P12 reported:

With autonomy, I don't think it's really affecting me, because again I'm remote. And I'm remote for a reason. If I was on campus, I don't think it would be the same. If I was on somebody's campus, I think I wouldn't have that much autonomy. I don't think I would. I don't think I would because they control you on the campus. I think my autonomy levels would be different. So, I feel autonomy is the number one key for leadership to be a great leader.

Substructure 1: Professional Satisfaction

Participants described authentic satisfaction when granted freedom in course design and the ability to integrate their research and lived expertise. Approximately eight of the twelve participants described experiencing this outcome. Within SDT, such conditions satisfied autonomy and competence needs, supporting intrinsic motivation and a stable academic identity (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This aligned with literature showing that autonomy-supportive climates enhance motivation and well-being for faculty and students and extended it by demonstrating a corrective effect on imposter thoughts for WOC in predominantly White departments (Cokley et al., 2017; Parkman, 2016)

P4 reported:

So, I guess it's important to note that I've been at my institution for about 17 years. I have lived within the academic side of things, within the student affairs side of things. And I currently kind of live in both because I teach, but I also have a position in student affairs. I always reference my institution as family. I know they say we're not supposed to do that, but once you've spent so many years in

one place, you can't help it. I always say that my department, like the office I work in, is my immediate family. And so, my immediate family, I feel like I have great autonomy with.

P12 reported:

Okay, in my particular academic role, my level of autonomy is pretty good. It's on a scale of 1 to 10; I would say it's about a nine. It's pretty good. I work remote, so I teach at two universities. So, it's pretty, it's pretty good.

Substructure 2: Restricted Decision-Making

Other participants reported scripts, surveillance, or topic policing that narrowed their academic discretion, especially around race-related content. Approximately nine of the twelve participants described experiencing this outcome. SDT would view these as autonomy-undermining constraints that impair internalization and trigger self-doubt; intersectionality clarifies why controls are clustered around race- and gender-coded expertise (Crenshaw, 1991). This confirmed reports of the exclusion and gatekeeping of racial research by WOC (Ahmed et al., 2020; Freeman et al., 2019).

P1 shared:

And so, the reason why I felt like my autonomy was undermined, because we had the autonomy to have discourse as it relates to the subject that we were teaching. And it was undermined because you took secondhand misinformation as if it were gospel. So that was one of my experiences where I felt like, so you really just want me to stick to the script. You don't want us to have those things. So that's

where I felt that was a time, and I resigned. I was like, yeah, ya'll play with somebody else.

P7 reflected:

Just recently I've had a situation where the decision was not up to me. And I felt sort of at that moment out of the loop and not in control of the situation where the decision was not up to me. And I really didn't like that feeling because I'm used to being the one who makes decisions for everything that I've done this past maybe 5 to 10 years. And just recently, I've had to encounter where the decision was not mine.

Substructure 3: Work–Life Strain

Balancing professional and personal obligations posed significant challenges. Approximately ten of the twelve participants described experiencing this outcome. Chronic strain from excessive workload and caregiving responsibilities constrained autonomy and competence needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Intersectionally, gendered care norms and racialized service burdens intensified time poverty for WOC faculty (Freeman et al., 2019).

P3 reported:

Well, my male colleagues don't have to really think too hard about, like, hey, do I need to prevent getting pregnant because I don't have tenure? It's like, I did have to think about that. Like, I did calculate very carefully. Like, when can we think about having a kid? Dealing with infertility then complicated that. It's like, well, wait a minute, you don't actually have total control. How's this going to work?

Also, like one of the medical issues I deal with, PMDD. So, it affects your mood throughout the month. It would just be like, I'd have like half the month where I have no energy, like full blown depression kind of thing.

Competence

Competence reflected participants' continual negotiation of self-confidence, performance, and validation within academia. Although most demonstrated mastery in teaching, mentoring, and research, imposter feelings persisted when external recognition failed to quiet internal doubt. Through the SDT lens, competence was a central psychological need that, when met, fostered motivation and a sense of belonging, but when frustrated, reinforced insecurity and self-doubt. The substructures—teaching strength, research insecurity, and validation through recognition — show how WOC professors balanced evidence of success with lingering uncertainty about legitimacy and expertise.

The competence structure—teaching strength, research insecurity, and validation through recognition—confirmed SDT's assertion that feelings of mastery and self-efficacy are critical to sustained motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Participants found competence through student engagement and mentoring but often struggled with research validation due to systemic marginalization. From an intersectional view, competence was repeatedly tested, requiring emotional labor and resilience to sustain perceived credibility in predominantly White institutions.

P1 reported:

So, my education is complete. In the sense of, I've gotten to the highest level of academia. So, not to say that I'm not continuously learning, because my scholars still teach me. It's a loop of learning, but it's not about me at this point. It's about am I meeting their needs as the scholar. So, that's what really motivates me, am I really listening to them and learning from them in tandem as they're learning with me? For example, the subject that I teach deals with learning divergence. So, does my teacher style meet the needs of all the different learning styles in my classroom, and that's important because I have a learning divergence.

P11 reported: "So also having other scholars cite my work and reach out to me for different reasons and things of that nature is really important to me and also lets me know that I'm headed in the right direction."

Substructure 4: Teaching Strength

Teaching success and student validation affirmed competence and countered IS. Approximately eleven of the twelve participants described experiencing this outcome. These experiences satisfied SDT's competence need and aligned with research suggesting that effective teaching and mentorship buffer IS (Cokley et al., 2017; Parkman, 2016).

P6 reflected:

I did a symposium and after the symposium, you can ask questions. And afterwards, people who were running the entire conference was like, your session had the most engaged audience, people ask the most questions. I think my presentation itself was supposed to be 40 minutes with like another five minutes

for questions. And my presentation was 40 minutes, but the questions were like 15 to 20 minutes of me just like going back and forth and answering questions.

P11 reported:

My university does a thing where once a month I get a report on who all has downloaded my dissertation. And the five years since I graduated, it's been downloaded 1700 times across 34 countries. And I'm like, wait a minute, that's kind of a big deal. And when you're at conferences and people come up to you and they're like, this presentation, this, and then they'll say like, oh, and you had that one. Because that's what's really important to me too.

Substructure 5: Research Insecurity

Participants expressed persistent anxiety about publishing and presenting their research, particularly when addressing race-related topics. Approximately nine of the twelve participants described experiencing this outcome. These fears reflected competence frustration within SDT, compounded by racialized credibility barriers (Crenshaw, 1991). Findings extended those of Ahmed et al. (2020) and Freeman et al. (2019) by revealing phenomenological links between racialized gatekeeping and IS. P5 said: "And then speaking at conferences when I think that maybe my topic or my research is irrelevant and getting ready to walk out the room."

Substructure 6: Validation Through Recognition

Recognition through awards, external collaborations, and student appreciation served as corrective feedback, validating participants' expertise. Approximately ten of the twelve participants described experiencing this outcome. Within SDT, such feedback

reinforced competence and intrinsic motivation. Intersectionally, recognition countered institutional invisibility (Crenshaw, 1989; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

P3 reported: “When I present at conferences or receive messages from women saying my advice helped them defend their proposals, it reaffirms that I’m making a difference.”

P5 reported:

And I was at a mentoring session at one of the large conferences and I was like, I just don't know if I can do this. And she pulled me aside and she's like, no, you're good enough. You're smart enough. You got a PhD like everyone else. Nobody handed it to you. She's like and take it for what you will. She's all but F imposter syndrome. She's like, you just got to keep moving forward. And so, every time that I think that I want to back down, I'm like, oh, she's right, right? Like F imposter syndrome. We're all good enough. We all got here the same way. And we all bring value in a different way to the table.

Racialized Scrutiny, Bias, and Microaggressions

Racialized scrutiny encompassed the continuous evaluation and judgment WOC professors endured due to their race and gender. Participants’ accounts revealed how subtle and overt biases shaped classroom interactions, promotion opportunities, and daily collegial relationships. These experiences confirmed that imposter feelings were not individual distortions but logical responses to systemic inequities. Through intersectional and SDT perspectives, racialized scrutiny undermined relatedness and autonomy, as participants expended emotional labor to navigate biased expectations. The substructures— misrecognition and bias, reframing oppression, and trailblazer burden

demonstrate how participants resisted, redefined, and at times internalized racialized academic pressures.

This overarching structure integrated misrecognition, bias, reframing oppression, and the trailblazer burden. Participants' accounts confirmed Crenshaw's (1991) argument that overlapping racial and gender identities intensify marginalization, producing constant surveillance and invalidation. Experiences of misrecognition and racialized scrutiny align with those of Griffin (2020), who documented that WOC faculty members encounter persistent questioning of their expertise and belonging. However, participants also extended this literature by reframing these encounters as evidence of systemic inequity rather than personal inadequacy, a coping strategy that challenged internalized imposterism. The data disconfirmed deficit-based models of IS that locate the problem solely within the individual; instead, imposter feelings emerged as contextually produced. Within SDT, racialized scrutiny represented chronic frustration of the competence and relatedness needs, underscoring how external prejudice undermines intrinsic motivation and belonging.

P1 reported:

It goes back to when I was a child, and that trauma response I said, I felt like as a Black child, I did not have the luxury of not being excellent because, again, Malcolm X said it best, Black women are the least protected, most disrespected, and it shows up, it presents itself.

P4 reported:

I think that until we are able to break down all these racist policies, break down all those things, it's always going to be a struggle for us. And you know what Malcolm X says the most disrespected, the most treated badly is the Black woman. And so, I feel that way, and I still see it. Something I was talking to somebody about; was Black women are the only women that every single population warns them about. So, when we think about dating, White folks are saying, nope, don't date Black women. But even Black men are also looking at us. And so, we are the only people that everybody got a problem with.

P11 reported:

When you see my first name, you know what time it is. And so even if I don't choose to, my race and gender lead and beat me there. They always enter the door before me. And so, I used to spend time thinking about what opportunities have I potentially missed out on?

Substructure 7: Misrecognition and Bias

Participants encountered racialized misrecognition, such as being mistaken for students or having their appearance policed. Approximately eight of the twelve participants described experiencing this outcome. These events undermined relatedness and competence needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and reflected racialized visibility/invisibility (Crenshaw, 1991). This finding confirmed prior studies documenting the compounded impact of bias and microaggressions on WOC faculty (Wilkins-Yel et al., 2018).

P5 reported:

My university is an (HSI) Hispanic serving institution with the majority of the students being Hispanic, but I was only one of eight in the entire university Hispanic professors. Not in the college, not in the department, but in the entire university at an HSI, I was only one of eight Hispanic professors. And that was alarming and that was concerning.

P6 reported: “And then I think on top of the fact that I don't see many people who look like me outside of my direct supervisor. I was the only Black woman in my department.”

Substructure 8: Reframing Oppression

Participants reframed exclusionary experiences as evidence of systemic inequities rather than personal inadequacy. Approximately seven of the twelve participants described experiencing this outcome. This meaning-making process restored autonomy and supported adaptive coping consistent with SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This finding aligned with Ahmed et al. (2020) on critical consciousness as a resilience mechanism among WOC in academia.

P1 reported: “Because you don't want to deal with all of that extra stuff, but I take it on as if it's a me thing, and it's not a me thing, it's a them thing.”

Substructure 9: Trailblazer Burden

Being the first or only WOC in a department created visibility and mentoring demands often uncompensated, producing cultural taxation. Approximately eight of the twelve participants described experiencing this outcome. SDT suggests that unchosen service without recognition erodes autonomy and relatedness; intersectionally, race and gender expectations amplified the load (Freeman et al., 2019).

P4 reported:

I think everything that I do has one been for my family, but also my goal has always been to provide better experiences for people that look like me culturally. Not just look like me but that also share, experiences culturally. And so, I think my motivation has always been to just kind of change things and make things better.

Gender and Intersectionality

The overarching structure of gender and intersectionality captured the compounded nature of participants' experiences as WOC. Their narratives showed how sexism intertwined with racism to produce unique barriers, from appearance-based scrutiny to disproportionate service demands. Gendered and racialized expectations amplified imposter thoughts and emotional fatigue. Through intersectionality, participants illuminated how their identities were simultaneously hypervisible and undervalued, while SDT clarified the threat these dynamics posed to autonomy and relatedness. The substructures—gendered inequities, protective boundaries, and compounded barriers—reflect how participants recognized, resisted, and navigated the layered oppressions embedded in academic life.

Findings related to gendered inequities and compounded barriers confirmed Crenshaw's (1989) theory that race and gender interact to structure opportunity and exclusion. Participants detailed experiences of sexist expectations, appearance policing, and disproportionate service work, which aligned with Priddie et al. (2022). WOC faced unique burdens not captured in gender-only analyses. Within SDT, these findings

illustrated persistent frustration of autonomy and relatedness needs, as participants navigated patriarchal expectations while advocating for self-definition. Ultimately, gender and intersectionality contextualize imposter experiences as socially produced, not individually deficient.

P5 reported:

Like, I questioned something once and I'm like, you don't even see us as faculty, the few of us who are here on campus as Brown faculty. Because there was a movement to increase Black faculty, but then Brown just got ignored. And I am completely an ally with Black and Brown in terms of us having very similar experiences. But they thought that diversifying meant amplifying the Black and the White narrative, but Brown just kind of got muted.

P11 reported: "You can even see that sometimes in the classroom where there could be 20 students in a class and three of them are male. And sometimes those males will want to dominate the entire conversation and what have you."

Substructure 10: Gendered Inequities

Appearance-based judgments, patriarchal silencing, and unequal workloads shaped imposter experiences at the gendered level while intersecting with race.

Approximately nine of the twelve participants described experiencing this outcome.

These findings extended research on gendered bias (Godsil et al., 2016) by illustrating how intersectional marginalization amplified imposter experiences for WOC faculty.

P5 reported:

I have different thoughts on how gender identity intersect with your experiences in academia because religion is the predominant determinant of how things go down at my institution. It is a predominantly LDS community. So Mormon is the predominant religion. And so, I think that takes more precedence over, but it is not muted. Because in the Mormon Church, it is a very misogynistic, patriarchal society. And so, in that sense, yeah, we go to meetings, and one gender speaks and everybody else is muted and it erases rank.

Substructure 11: Protective Boundaries

Participants reported asserting professional limits to preserve emotional health and autonomy. Approximately six of the twelve participants described experiencing this outcome. Such behaviors represented autonomy-restoring strategies aligned with SDT and intersectional resistance to caretaking stereotypes.

P3 reported:

One, that COVID pandemic closures helped a lot. Stay away from people who are just like straight-up toxic kind of thing. Like if I ain't got to engage them, don't engage them. Like, engage them in a superficial way so that they feel like you're collegial, so that they don't tank you when you go up for your tenure review.

Substructure 12: Compounded Barriers

Participants experienced intensified challenges where racial and gender biases intersected, leading to frequent questioning of authority and expertise. Approximately nine of the twelve participants described experiencing this outcome. This confirmed

Crenshaw's (1991) argument that WOC face unique, nonadditive discrimination patterns in professional contexts.

P5 reported:

I constantly have to question myself because they constantly question me because saying it without saying is how can this Brown girl walk into our institution and then all of their stereotypes go into play. They'll find 1000 reasons why you're not qualified or you're not smart enough or you're not good enough, but they won't apply those same principles to themselves.

Coping and Resilience

Coping and resilience represented the strategies WOC professors employed to manage the psychological impact of IS and institutional inequities. Despite systemic obstacles, participants demonstrated remarkable adaptability, drawing strength from mentorship, spirituality, therapy, and boundary-setting. Their coping reflected both resistance and renewal, transforming vulnerability into empowerment. Within SDT, these behaviors restored autonomy, competence, and relatedness, fostering intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement in academia. The substructures — coping through emotional strength, coping through mentorship and support, and coping through boundary-setting — illustrate the multifaceted ways participants maintained persistence and well-being.

Coping and resilience integrated emotional strength, protective boundaries, mentorship, and boundary-setting. These findings confirmed Ryan and Deci's (2017) view that autonomy-supportive strategies enhance psychological well-being, aligning with Priddie et al. (2022), who identified mentorship and peer support as protective

factors for WOC faculty. Viewed through intersectionality, coping emerged as both a means of survival and activism, a way of restoring autonomy, competence, and relatedness amid structural constraints. This overarching structure demonstrates that resilience among WOC professors is not merely endurance, but a conscious reclaiming of self-determination within inequitable systems.

P12 reported: “Yeah, so navigating the barriers is a lot of meditation. Literally, no, there's a lot of meditation. I love to journal, therapy. And these are real answers, therapy.

Because at the end of the day, I am human.”

Substructure 13: Coping Through Emotional Strength

Spirituality, therapy, and self-affirmation supported emotion regulation and meaning-making. Approximately eight of the twelve participants described experiencing this outcome. These strategies satisfied relatedness and autonomy (SDT) and aligned with reports that culturally grounded coping mitigates IS among WOC.

P9 reported: “You have to know yourself. That's the first thing. You have to know what you're talking about. And no one can take that away from you.”

Substructure 14: Coping Through Mentorship and Support

Mentorship and peer collaboration provided validation, sponsorship, and navigation strategies. Approximately ten of the twelve participants described experiencing this outcome. These relationships satisfied SDT's relatedness need and aligned with literature emphasizing mentorship as a protective factor for WOC scholars (Priddie et al., 2022).

P5 reported: “I created my own circle, sister circle, and there's researchers out there that talk about femtorship, the femtorship model. Like feminism and mentorship kind of married together, femtorship.”

Substructure 15: Coping Through Boundary-Setting

Participants described setting boundaries to manage overwork, resist tokenization, and sustain personal well-being. Approximately nine of the twelve participants described experiencing this outcome. These autonomy-restoring actions reflected intrinsic motivation and mirrored SDT principles (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This finding highlighted the importance of structural support for sustainable work practices.

P6 reported: “I try to be very intentional about being personable and being friendly, but I don't have outside of working relationships with my colleagues.”

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. The study included a small, purposive sample of 12 WOC professors, which limits the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of faculty. Although the participants represented multiple disciplines and institution types, their experiences may not capture the full diversity of WOC in academia. Self-selection bias may have influenced participation; individuals who volunteered might have been more comfortable discussing imposter experiences than those who declined to participate. Conducting virtual interviews via Zoom restricted observation of nonverbal communication and environmental context. As the primary researcher shared some social and professional

characteristics with the participants, a complete elimination of bias was not possible, despite the use of reflexivity. Finally, the phenomenological design emphasized the depth of experience rather than the breadth of data; therefore, the findings should be interpreted as contextual insights rather than universal claims. Despite these limitations, adherence to Giorgi's method and maintenance of a clear audit trail enhanced the study's credibility, dependability, and confirmability.

Recommendations

Building upon the strengths and limitations of this study, several areas for future research are recommended. Future studies could adopt a broader approach to examine the lived experiences of IS among WOC professors across different types of institutions, regions, and career stages. Expanding the sample beyond the twelve participants in this study could help capture the nuances that emerge among WOC faculty at research-intensive universities, historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), community colleges, and private liberal arts institutions. This broader perspective would provide a richer understanding of how institutional culture, geographical context, and career trajectory intersect to influence imposter feelings and coping mechanisms among diverse WOC faculty members.

Future research could also adopt a comparative approach, including studies that examine the experiences of WOC professors in relation to other underrepresented faculty groups or men of color in academia. Comparative analyses could illuminate how intersecting factors, such as gender, race, class, and academic rank, shape imposter experiences differently across groups. Understanding these variations could help

institutions develop more targeted interventions that address the unique psychological and structural challenges faced by each population. Additionally, longitudinal research could be valuable for examining how IS evolves over time. Following WOC professors throughout their professional journeys, from early career to tenure and into leadership positions, could reveal patterns of persistence, transformation, or resolution of imposter experiences across different stages of academic life.

Further research should also prioritize intervention-focused studies that assess the impact of specific programs or institutional practices designed to mitigate IS and enhance belonging among WOC faculty. For example, examining the effectiveness of structured mentorship programs, affinity-based professional networks, or inclusive leadership initiatives could provide evidence-based strategies for universities aiming to cultivate autonomy, competence, and relatedness; the three basic psychological needs outlined in self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Such studies could also evaluate how institutional policies that acknowledge invisible labor, value diversity-related research, and equitably distribute service responsibilities contribute to decreasing imposter experiences and promoting retention of WOC in higher education.

Additionally, future research could benefit from adopting mixed-methods approaches that integrate quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Quantitative measures of autonomy, competence, and relatedness could be combined with phenomenological interviews to triangulate data and strengthen the empirical understanding of imposter syndrome among WOC faculty. This would allow scholars to identify measurable trends while still honoring the depth and contextual richness of lived

experiences. Such integration could also help determine whether interventions meaningfully enhance psychological need satisfaction and reduce imposter tendencies over time.

Finally, researchers should explore the broader policy implications of addressing IS through institutional reform. Studies that evaluate how faculty development policies, hiring practices, and promotion criteria affect the professional identities of WOC professors could provide critical insights for higher education leaders. These findings could inform equity-driven initiatives that not only validate WOC professors' expertise but also transform institutional climates that perpetuate marginalization. By pursuing these recommended avenues of research, the scholarly community can expand upon the foundational insights from this study, deepen the understanding of IS within an intersectional framework, and contribute to systemic change that supports equity, inclusion, and psychological well-being across academia.

Implications

The results of this study have implications for positive social change at multiple levels. At the individual level, increased awareness that IS among WOC professors is shaped by institutional inequities rather than personal inadequacy and can empower faculty to reframe self-doubt as a product of systemic barriers. At the organizational level, universities can use these findings to develop equity-centered mentoring programs, transparent promotion policies, and inclusive faculty development initiatives that affirm autonomy and competence. At the societal level, by contributing to broader discourses on

representation and equity in higher education, the study supports policies that promote diversity, retention, and leadership advancement for WOC faculty.

Theoretical implications: The integration of SDT and intersectionality offers a dual framework that connects psychological needs with social structure. The findings demonstrate how phenomenology can reveal the essence of IS while acknowledging the systemic forces that sustain it. **Methodological implications:** This study affirmed the utility of Giorgi's descriptive approach for examining intersectional experiences in academia.

Practical implications: Institutions may apply these insights to create mentorship opportunities, peer-support networks, and training that address bias and emotional labor. Departmental leaders should consider equitable workload distribution and validation practices that acknowledge the contributions of WOC faculty beyond token diversity efforts. Counseling centers and faculty wellness programs can incorporate discussions of imposter syndrome that are culturally responsive and trauma informed.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study provided a deep understanding of IS as experienced by WOC professors in higher education. Through Giorgi's method, the voices of 12 participants illuminated how autonomy, competence, racialized scrutiny, gender inequities, and coping converge to shape their academic identities. The findings revealed that imposter syndrome is not an isolated psychological flaw but a reflection of structural inequities within academia. While self-doubt persisted, participants demonstrated agency, resilience, and resistance through mentorship, boundary-setting, and reframing

oppression. Their experiences underscore the need for institutional transformation that validates the presence and expertise of WOC professors. Ultimately, this study contributes to ongoing conversations about equity and belonging in higher education. Addressing IS at both individual and systemic levels can foster environments where all scholars, regardless of race, gender, or background, can thrive authentically and unapologetically within the academic community.

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Appendix A: Semistructured Interview Questions

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)1. **Autonomy:**

- **Question:** How do you perceive your level of autonomy (**the freedom to make your own decisions**) in your academic role?
- **Follow-up:** Can you share an experience where you felt your autonomy was either supported or undermined in your work environment?

2. **Competence:**

- **Question:** How do you assess your sense of competence in your teaching and research?
- **Follow-up:** Can you describe a specific achievement that enhanced your feelings of competence or made you question it?

3. **Relatedness:**

- **Question:** How important are supportive relationships with colleagues and students to your motivation and sense of belonging?
- **Follow-up:** Can you provide an example of a relationship that has positively or negatively impacted your experience with imposter syndrome?

4. Intrinsic Motivation:

- **Question:** What internal drives motivate you to pursue your academic career despite challenges like imposter syndrome?
- **Follow-up:** Can you share a specific moment when your intrinsic motivation helped you overcome feelings of self-doubt?

5. Extrinsic Motivation:

- **Question:** How do external factors (**e.g., recognition, promotions, or institutional support**) influence your motivation in your academic role?
- **Follow-up:** Can you think of a time when external validation helped alleviate your feelings of imposter syndrome?

Intersectionality Theory**6. Racial Identity:**

- **Question:** In what ways do you feel your racial identity influences your experiences and perceptions of imposter syndrome?
- **Follow-up:** Can you describe any specific instances where your racial identity was a factor in how you experienced or addressed imposter syndrome?

7. Gender Identity:

- **Question:** How does your gender identity intersect with your experiences in academia, particularly regarding feelings of imposter syndrome?

- **Follow-up:** Can you share a moment where your gender identity played a role in how you were perceived by colleagues or students?

8. **Intersectionality of Race and Gender:**

- **Question:** How do you think the interplay of your race and gender affects your overall experiences in higher education?
- **Follow-up:** Can you provide examples of how these intersecting identities have shaped your feelings of competence or autonomy?

9. **Barriers Related to Identities:**

- **Question:** What barriers related to your identities (**race, gender**) have you encountered that hinder your motivation?
- **Follow-up:** How have you navigated these barriers to maintain or enhance your motivation?

10. **Comparative Experiences:**

- **Question:** How do you believe your experiences with imposter syndrome compare to those of your peers in academia?
- **Follow-up:** What do you think accounts for any differences or similarities?

11. **Coping Strategies:**

- **Question:** What strategies have you developed to cope with imposter syndrome in your academic career?

- **Follow-up:** How effective do you find these strategies in promoting your intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (**intrinsic motivation comes from within and is driven by personal interest, while extrinsic motivation is driven by external rewards**)?

12. Future Influences:

- **Question:** How do you see your experiences with imposter syndrome influencing your future in academia?
- **Follow-up:** What steps do you plan to take to foster a more positive academic experience for yourself and others who share similar identities?

Appendix B: Social Media Recruitment Flyer



Exploring the Lived Experiences of Imposter Syndrome Among Women of Color Professors in Higher Education

I am seeking volunteers to participate in a research study exploring the unique challenges and experiences faced by Women of Color (WOC) professors dealing with imposter syndrome. Your insights can help shape future institutional practices and support systems.

Why Participate?

- ❖ Your contributions may lead to a better understanding of how systemic barriers affect WOC professors and inform policies that promote equity in academia.



Study conducted for completion of a dissertation under
Walden UNIVERSITY

Are you eligible?

- ❖ Identify as a woman of color
- ❖ Hold a faculty position at a higher education institution for at least one year
- ❖ Have experienced imposter syndrome in your academic career

Participation Process

1. Click the link below or scan the QR code in the bottom left corner to review the consent form.

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/YTTBJF>

2. Provide your consent by selecting 'Yes, I consent' in the online survey.
3. Complete a short demographic survey (about 5 minutes) within the same form.
4. The researcher will contact you to schedule a 45-60 minute Zoom interview to discuss your experiences.

Questions?

Contact me using the information below:

Researcher: Adrianna M Hooker

Study Supervisor: Dr. Eihel Perly, PhD

Appendix C: Demographic Questions

1. What is your age range?
 - 25-34
 - 35-44
 - 45-54
 - 55-64
 - 65 or older
2. How do you self-identify your racial or ethnic background? (Please specify)
3. How many years have you been employed as a professor in higher education?
4. What type of institution do you currently work at? (e.g., public university, private university, community college)
5. What is your academic discipline or department?
6. Are you currently tenured, tenure-track, or non-tenure-track faculty?
7. Full Name
8. Phone Number
9. Email