

Confronting otherness: An e-conversation between doctoral students
Living with the Imposter Syndrome

Georgann Cope Watson

Brock University
gwatson@brocku.ca

Andrea Smith Betts

York University
Andrea_Betts@edu.yorku.ca

Abstract

This qualitative research study is about two women doctoral students who are experiencing “The Imposter Syndrome” (Clance & Imes, 1978), a phenomenon characterized by an inability to internalize academic success. The purpose of this study is to connect the theoretical frameworks around this phenomenon to our experiences as women graduate students in a doctoral program. The research question for this study is: Do our email conversations provide us with clues to explain our imposter feelings? The methodology for this study is autoethnography (Ellis, 1997). Emails collected over an eight month period provide the data for this study. To analyze the data we used thematic analysis. The data reveal three predominant themes; fear, family and fellowship. The findings of this study provoke an extension into the experiences of other doctoral students as they meet the challenges of self concepts in their course of study.

Introduction

This qualitative research study is about two women doctoral students who are experiencing “The Imposter Syndrome” (Clance & Imes, 1978), a phenomenon characterized by an inability to internalize academic success. There is an assumption that the feelings of self-doubt that students may experience are embedded individually or idiosyncratically, as students attribute perceived deficiencies to their personal lack of academic competencies (Acker, 1997; Bell, 1990; Clance & Imes, 1978; Zorn, 2005). However, we have found through this study that these feelings are more likely to be embedded in the institutional or systemic discourses that circulate in academic environments (Acker, 1997; Acker & Armenti, 2004; Acker & Fluevenger, 1996; Bell, 1990; Clance & Imes, 1978; Zorn, 2005).

The purpose of this study is to connect the theoretical frameworks around this phenomenon to our experiences as women graduate students. We explore our strategies for confronting our sense of otherness, a feeling of being outside the dominant group that populates the academy through our part-time and full time student status and our identities as teaching assistants in the university, and locate these strategies within the current body of literature. We also explore the concept of peer support as a strategy to confront the tensions we experience as we move forward in our individual doctoral programs. This study is significant because it reveals some of the covert institutional and systemic networks that cultivate the impostor phenomenon. It is our anticipation that this study will resonate with other students who may be experiencing feelings of self doubt.

Research Questions

Research questions in a qualitative study in general, develop once some of the data have been collected, since it is difficult to anticipate the themes that will emerge from the study (Bilken & Casella, 2007). Likewise, in this study, we begin with some very broad questions since we do not know where the data will lead us.

We pose the following research questions as a starting point:

1. Do our email conversations reveal common experiences as doctoral students in regards to our fears of and difficulties with juggling multiple roles and identities in gendered spaces?
2. Is it possible to place these revelations within the past and current research on the imposter syndrome?
3. What is the role of peer support in doctoral studies with students experiencing the imposter syndrome?

These questions help to set a point of inquiry for this study. We began by wondering if we could explore our experiences through our email conversations, and further, if an analysis of the email conversations would reveal themes that would answer the questions we had about our fears of being doctoral students. We also wondered if our experiences would be reflected in the literature around the imposter syndrome. Finally, we wanted to explore the possibility of countering our fears and challenges through a practice of peer support.

Theoretical Framework for Methodology

We made use of the auto-ethnographic process to facilitate the storying and re-storying of our lived experiences as doctoral students in an educational setting. We have a desire to make sense of our lived experiences through an examination of our own emails. Our email conversations represent a contemporary form of discourse, one that has proven to be convenient for both of us. We were able to analyze our own perceptions, emotions, and experiences while comparing them then to each other's. Collecting emails proved to be an effective and efficient form of gathering data. First, it allows the researcher and the participants to carry on threads of conversation over time. It further eliminates the transcription phase of the process.

Sameshima (2007) introduced a form of research through this literacy. We chose to model our work after Sameshima's because we wanted to capture the spontaneity of the conversations, take advantage of the instant messaging nature of the modality and reveal the transparency of our experiences. Also, the transcription of the data is a concurrent process, saving us both time and expense. Finally, the language and the discourse of the emails capture the true essence of our emotions, revealing a temporality that is hard to capture in sporadic interviews.

The case for privileging the subjective voice in qualitative research has been made by many researchers since the 1980s (Bochner, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Crawley, 2009; Ellis, 1997). Ellis (1997) attempted to address the concern of language as she moved away from "speaking as an omniscient narrator in the third person voice" (p. 123) in order to make her voice heard by readers outside the academy. Ellis's work gives us permission to write in a different way: A way that reflects our experience and draws the reader into our story. Ellis did this cleverly and her writing incites a rejection of the alienating language of the scholar that is inaccessible to many readers. Ellis acknowledged some of the perceived problems with self inquiry such as validity and relevance. Yet, she rejected the notion that it is self indulgent. Her words encourage us to reclaim self-absorption in order to write well about "the world [we] inhabit, and the process [we] find ourselves a part of, which also works its way into [our] identity" (Ellis, 1997, p. 123). Validity of this type of self-study research is often viewed as problematic, and requires justification. Ellis states that "validity can be judged by whether it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is authentic and lifelike, believable and possible; the story's generalizability can be judged by whether it speaks to readers about their experience" (p. 133). From this then, a degree of validity can be ascribed to our emails as they will evoke a sense of familiarity in our readers. We describe experiences and feelings that have been relayed to us from other women graduates which we have captured in our email.

Personal narratives are important. Crawley (2009) admitted to having an argument to make but no 'data' with which to style her argument. She confronted this tension through writing an autoethnography about her own experiences. Drawing on Ellis's (1997) work, she argued that autoethnography is the opposite of autobiography, a theoretical paper with a sociological analysis in which the author is the data. Crawley believed that her autoethnography evoked

a common experience that a researcher could not learn without embodying it. The data are useful because our experiences could be exemplary of many people's common experiences (Crawley, 2009).

Bochner (2000) stated that autoethnography is "a deep self reflection and systematic sociological analysis of the social order of one's life—generally organized around the particular topic being theorized" (Bochner, 2000, p. 270). Therefore, autoethnography is best organized around theoretical issues and theory should be implicit throughout. One critique of autoethnography is that the simplicity of telling stories does not constitute research or make a contribution to a field of study. However, when placed within a theoretical framework, autoethnography opens up the possibilities of a space for emotion through an examination of the experiences that persist in our memories. Bochner believed that autoethnography provides us with a tool to theorize our memories and stories as we move the data through an analysis.

The autoethnographic method is suitable to this study as we re-story the representations of our experiences that are embedded in our e conversations. Like Crawley (2009), we view this autoethnography as a sociological research paper in which we are the data. We will connect the elements of our experience through the examination of the data (our emails as data) in this study. If these elements can be systematically deconstructed and given validity through connections to the work of other authors, they will be able to help us understand how to contradict our sense of otherness while we negotiate our sense of self as doctoral students.

Methodology

We make use of autoethnography as the methodology for our study as it allows us to explore our experience of a lived event. The aim of our inquiry is to focus on our subjective experience rather than a presentation of the belief of a studied group. We want to share our experiences as evidenced in our emails. Together we are the primary participants. We are constructing a depiction of ourselves, together, as a supposed imposter which we then place against the backdrop of the literature on women as imposters in the academy. Our work is a shared narrative, as we juxtapose our autoethnographies.

The data for this study are the collection of emails exchanged during an eight-month period throughout one academic year. Emails were sent on a daily basis and varied in length from a few lines to several paragraphs. We employ a thematic analysis for predominant themes. Next, we locate these themes within the theoretical frameworks found in the literature. We were the writers-interpreters, moving the emails (and the stories within them) from field notes to research notes and finally to text. The text is the working interpretive document that contains our attempt to make sense of what we have learned. The final form of the work is the analysis of the data that assume a critical form, revealing themes which connect to the conceptual framework, authenticating our experiences and ultimately providing us with a rationale to explain this phenomenon.

Background to the Study

Women and Education

Students are subjectively constituted within multiple socially produced and changing discourses that feature competition, individual achievement, striving for continuous improvement, and placing of responsibility of success on the individual (Acker & Fluevenger, 1996). For students in higher education, this process begins in undergraduate study, grows in graduate school and flourishes among academics. Historically, this discourse includes the essentialist concept that boys would enter higher education and girls would become teachers, nurses, wives, and mothers. Parallel to this concept is the patriarchal notion that women stayed at home as primary caretakers of the family and the children. These hegemonic norms continue today in contemporary discourses in ways that make it difficult to be both a mother and an academic. Acker and Armenti (2004) referred to this concept as 'the old norms' (Acker & Armenti, 2004, p. 18). These old norms support the dominant discourse circulating in the academy and thus support a climate that is "conducive to the values, lives, and priorities of white men" (Acker & Fluevenger, 1996, p. 7). Bell (1990) recognized that sex-role expectations of our culture frequently give women conflicting messages about achievement making it difficult to internalize success.

Many women academics remain superstitiously trapped in the hegemonic discourse of the old norms of sexism and patriarchy. The imposter syndrome, as defined earlier, is an inability to internalize success as being the result of one's own work. Women feel that they have succeeded in a given field due to reasons outside of themselves (Clance & Imes, 1974). As researchers in this study, we are conscious of this paradox, yet we have trouble implementing praxis: reflection and transformation in action. This paper is an attempt to liberate ourselves from this passive, prescriptive role. Further, as a feminist practice, we acknowledge and accept the organizing principle of feminist research methodology that recognizes the importance of locating knowledge within the lived experiences of women.

Looking further into feminist discourse, Dorothy E. Smith (1974, 1987, 1990, 1999, 2003, 2005) began her sociology from the standpoint that our culture is socially constructed, with men being the primary constructors. In large measure, the symbols, the vocabulary, the codes of our culture reflect the standpoint of males. Our language is premised on the male standpoint, and this perspective is so well internalized that even women have a degree of difficulty speaking and writing in a voice that includes their gender. Often times the natural inclination is to separate the mind from the body, to objectify subjects. Women are not disembodied but carry with them the particularities of domesticity. To speak and write in a voice that includes their gender is to acknowledge and respect the reality that "[we] do not cease to be present and active in the everyday world when [we] go to work" (Smith, 2005, p. 21). The net effect of accepting the male position as universal is that it may exclude and silence women. Much research on the imposter syndrome and academia demonstrates this marginality. Smith initiated her work from a woman's perspective but later this evolved into a standpoint for everyone. Her theory is that Institutional Ethnography is a methodological starting point designed to establish a subject position from which to begin research, a position that can be open to anyone. This standpoint:

creates a point of entry into discovering the social that does not subordinate the knowing subject to objectified forms of knowledge of society or political economy. It is a method of inquiry that works from the actualities of people's everyday lives and experience to discover the social as it extends beyond experience. (Smith, 2005, p. 10)

Smith (2005) extended her thoughts to include and to make her work into sociology for people rather than simply women. It still has the goal of exposing subordination. The sociology proposed by Smith seeks to explore the socially organized practices that constitute objectified forms of knowledge as insiders, exploring what we already know how to do and in which we participate (Smith, 1990).

If we are to examine our reading of the academy as women graduate students from Smith's Institutional Ethnographic perspective, we see that our experiences fit well within this sociology. Taking the imposter syndrome as subordination, we have been made aware of the disjuncture between our participation in the academy and our everyday lives within our family as an organization of subjectivity. Our feelings of being an imposter are created within the regulatory framework of masculinity. The language of the academy, its policies, rules, regulations and requirements originate in a male standpoint, excluding the lived experiences of women as not only academics but also as care providers.

There is a considerable amount of recent research based in Clance and Imes' imposter phenomenon amongst women academics (Acker, 1997; Acker & Armenti, 2004; Acker & Fluevenger, 1996; Bell, 1990; Kurtz-Costes, Andrew-Helmke, & Ulku-Steiner, 2006; Wyn, Acker, & Richards, 2000; Zorn, 2005). In one study, Acker (1997) identified a number of issues or dilemmas for women academics. Some of these issues include the difficulties of attaining a tenure track position in the academy; working collaboratively with colleagues and administrators; learning the cultures of the department, faculty, institution, discipline and in some cases 'the field' and then learning to live within these cultures; developing a pedagogy; coping with evaluation (tenure, promotion, merit and similar reviews); and juggling work and domestic demands (Acker, 1997). In a follow up study, Acker and Armenti (2004) found that we should continue to explore the changing nature of the imposter syndrome. Wagner, Acker, and Mayuzumi (2008) continued to study the possibilities of achieving full equity for various groups (including women) working and learning within higher education.

A constant theme of the difficulties of merit, tenure and promotion emerged in all of the studies (Acker, 1997; Acker & Armenti, 2004; Acker & Fluevenger, 1996; Bell, 1990; Kurtz-Costes et al., 2006; Studdard, 2002; Wyn, et al., 2000; Zabaleta, 2007; Zorn, 2005). Connections to Foucault's (1979) work on surveillance and classification cannot be ignored. These techniques of disciplinary practice circulate as productive mechanisms that serve the needs of the

faculties, but ignore the impact on the well being of its subjects. They manifest in the processes of merit review (often attached to contracts and financial rewards); course evaluations (with no clear research to show the relationship between student evaluations and the actual merits of teaching performance, Zabaleta, 2007), and promotion and tenure (with its emphasis on publications and its disregard for other types of scholarly work). The paradox is the deeply embedded idea that the university holds a meritocratic discourse (i.e., individuals are judged on performance), and differences in their capacity to perform are discounted. Typically and ironically, a meritocratic discourse incorporates gender-blindness in the name of fairness (Acker & Armenti, 2004).

Why Study the Imposter Syndrome?

Acker and Armenti (2004) noted that there is a large gap in the educational and feminist research between the 1980s and the early 2000s around women in the academy. During this time, women increased their presence in the academy and by 2005 occupied 33% of Canadian faculty positions. Proposing that the lack of research activity around the Imposter Syndrome may be due to the changing and more favourable conditions in the academy for women, Acker and Armenti revisited the issue with a Canadian study of 43 tenured and tenured track participants. The findings of their study reveal “that times have not changed much that we should abandon this topic, in fact the underlying structures and ideologies that work to the disadvantage of women in academe continue to exert a strong unheralded impact” (Acker & Armenti, 2004, p. 4). This study reinforces our own experiences as women in the academy and supports further investigation into the current climate for women doctoral students in relation to the Imposter Syndrome.

As we search for answers in the literature, we hope to bring some understanding to our colleagues as to why we want to explore the phenomenon of the imposter syndrome, why we find this issue interesting, and how this issue presents itself from our perspective. We hold on to the assumption that our academic abilities and our acceptance into doctoral programs are attributed to the timing of our applications, the strength of our reference letters, or some other coincidence. We have always doubted our sense of belonging in our respective programs; thus, we share a feeling of ‘otherness’. We conceptualize ‘otherness as a feeling of not deserving to belong in a doctoral program. A review of the literature supports our lived experiences that students experience tensions around self-concepts while they move through their doctoral programs (Acker, 1997; Bell, 1990; Clance & Imes, 1978; Zorn, 2005). What is missing in the literature is a qualitative analysis of the actual experiences of doctoral students as they negotiate these tensions. There is a lack of research that explores the experience-based challenges and the strategies used to meet these challenges tied to the context of doctoral study.

McAlpine and Norton (2006) addressed attrition rates of Canadian doctoral students to discuss the prevalence of issues of isolation in the work done in graduate education. The Canadian Association of University Teachers (2003) almanac notes that, although attrition rates vary as a function of discipline and institution, that of about the 24 6000 students enrolled in a PhD program in 2003, only about 50% will actually graduate (Pyke, 2004). McAlpine and Norton’s work, however, reveals a lack of research on the early experiences of doctoral students as most of the current research focuses on students who are *all but dissertation* (ABD). This exclusion of doctoral students’ voices silences the students who leave the programs in the early years of study, since their stories have not been part of the data. According to Bowen and Rudenstine (1992), the voices of “the one third [of students] withdrawing within the first year and the one-third during the years between these two points remain unheard and academia is left with only speculations as to their reasons for leaving” (as cited in McAlpine & Norton, 2006, p. 7). This study attempts to provide a forum for our voices as we develop strategies to support our journeys through doctoral study.

About the Authors: Andrea and Georgann

As colleagues who are engaged in many relationships—including working together as teaching assistant/teaching assistant, professor/teaching assistant, classmates, authors, and conference presenters—we have found that our emails facilitate a dialogic relationship that is mutually supportive of each other.

We share many commonalities as women academics. Although we are full-time doctoral students we also have full-time jobs—Andrea outside the academy and Georgann within the academy—we each hold various teaching positions or research assistant positions throughout the academic year. We each live in a family of four with strong extended family support. Both our spouses also work full-time jobs and they are part-time students. We each have two children; Andrea’s children are school aged and Georgann’s children are young adults. We move between

multiple roles on a daily basis. Maintaining and prioritizing these multiple roles adds complexities to our daily lives. We are mothers, wives, students, and researchers.

We have similar philosophical orientations to teaching and learning; we interpret our role as teachers and academics to support learners as they develop new knowledges based on previous experiences or ways of thinking. We agree with Freire (1970) who posited that we must truly come to know our learners, live in their world and culture, and work with them as co-learners to create knowledge. Our shared philosophical orientation to the teaching component of our work manifests itself in our pedagogical practice. We both follow a reflexive instructional model that honours students' individual voices, moves away from the need to master knowledges towards a need to conceptualize knowledges, respects student's lived experiences as contributions to ways of constructing shared knowledges, and recognizes how our own positionality in a broader context influences our instructional practice (Maher & Thompson Tetreault, 1994). Our shared orientation towards a reflexive practice facilitates our supportive dialogic relationship. Our students are encouraged to take a Kierkegaardian stance in that their education with us is the process they go through to learn about themselves.

Who Experiences the Imposter Syndrome?

Clance and Imes (1978) conducted a study in the 70's with over 150 highly successful women—women with PhDs who were respected professionals in their fields or who were students recognized for their academic excellence. They found that despite their obvious success, women are more likely to either project the cause of their success outward to an external cause (luck) or a temporary internal quality (effort) that they do not equate with inherent ability. Conversely, the findings indicated that men tend to own success as attributable to an inherent quality. Deaux and Farris (1977) stated that women have apparently internalized a self-stereotype of the societal sex-role stereotype that they are not considered competent. Bell (1990) had similar findings in her study of high achieving gifted women; “despite external evidence to the contrary, many bright and capable women continue to doubt their competency, downplay or dismiss their abilities, and subscribe to the disabling belief that they are imposters” (Bell, 1990, p. 55). More recently, Acker and Armenti (2004) found that Canadian women academics were beginning to question how individual constructions of self contradict the more explicit attainment of success.

Zorn (2005) also pointed out “that the culture of the university makes it difficult to talk about the imposter phenomenon, and those experiencing it often suffer in isolation” (Zorn, 2005, p. 8). Entry into academia means new codes to learn, new roles to play, and new ways to “be”. Similarly, doctoral students must learn to cope with frequent evaluation, a competitive atmosphere and a high workload while trying to forge a new identity (Kurtz-Costes et al., 2006). As female graduate students, we have both experienced classrooms, hallway conversations, and professorial encounters that have taught us that we have rules within the walls of academia that must be adhered to if we are to succeed. Meeting and greeting events are often peppered with graduate students presenting their academic and publishing achievements as a way of introducing themselves. If we are to be perceived as good graduate students, we must then go to the conferences we are told to, attend the lectures, speakers series, or colloquium suggested by our advisors despite the often times incompatibility with our own schedules of family, childcare, or limited finances.

The imposter syndrome is nurtured within the discourse of academic environments. The research reveals that this phenomenon is more common amongst women than men (Acker, 1997; Acker & Armenti, 2004; Acker & Fluevenger, 1996; Bell, 1990; Clance & Imes, 1978; Zorn, 2005). Gender disparity incites a feminist approach to this study. Acker and Armenti (2004) noted that “in current circumstances, people who have been high achieving all of their lives, who are already highly committed to excellence and productivity, are risking their health and happiness to arrive at even higher and more mystified performance standards” (Acker & Armenti, 2004, p. 20). As researchers, we need to keep a gender perspective in the forefront as we explore the underlying conditions in the academy that support the perpetuation of the imposter syndrome.

Data Analysis and Discussion

In the analysis phase of this study, we compiled all of our emails, and then we each examined the data for emerging themes. We decided to apply an inductive thematic analysis to our emails to uncover significant themes (Strauss &

Corbin, 1998). This process involved coding the data, then grouping the codes into distinct themes. Three themes emerged from the data and we named them fear, family, and fellowship.

Our findings reveal our common struggles linked to the phenomenon of the imposter syndrome. In this section of the paper, we will highlight our findings within the three dominant themes: fear, family, and fellowship. We have included some of the dialogues from our emails to bring forward the authenticity of our emotions. The first theme is the concept of fear and it ranges from fear of incompetency, to fear of being able to successfully complete the course work, to fear of our ability to write in a style that will meet the standards of the academy. The following email excerpts (September 19–21, 2008) begin to reveal a sense of fear as Andrea began her course work. These excerpts represent the original data collected and thus reflect the colloquial and familiar discourse between the researchers.

- A: *Well I survived, Night One, night two tonight. Not as scary tonight as it is a Master Level course.*
- G: *Yep, scary huh? I almost threw up on my first day of class. I can remember all of the small details and the overwhelming feeling of being a major poser. Still scares me. I really thought that I was the only scared one in the room*
- A: *I think that I have gotten in over my head with the amount of work I have to do. Seminars to mark, an ethics application, two readings with triple entry journals, grant proposal forms, another reading.*
- G: *Yep, sounds like you are going to have to be very very very organized.*
- A: *I have this problem of getting this information, which I understand when I read it, but can't get it to stay in my head. If someone asked me what I asked you, I could not tell them off the top of my head.*
- G: *I know! So easy to write something, so hard to articulate it. Language is problematic. Plus, I am always afraid that I extract things from readings that no one else does...I found out this summer that this is part of my learning disability....great, something else to worry about. No wonder my writing is so weird!*

These emails reveal some common tensions amongst the researchers between their abilities and their performances. Kumar and Jagacinski (2004) found there is a relationship amongst women living with the imposter phenomenon and several measures relevant to achievement goal theory. Typically, “imposters attribute their success to non-ability factors, and may eventually abandon their attempts to demonstrate high levels of competence and instead focus on avoiding a demonstration of incompetence; that is, they develop an ability-avoid goal” (Kumar & Jagacinski, 2004, p. 148). Further, they find that “the correlates of imposter fears and ability-avoid goals suggest that the underlying motives, cognitive reactions, and affective states are similar” (Kumar & Jagacinski, 2004, p. 148). Fear of incompetency is a pervasive theme. Locating this theme in the literature allows us to confront our fears and place them against the systemic discourse that perpetuates feelings of inadequacy. This allows us to create space for emotion as we rationalize our experiences in this context.

Our next theme is family. We have chosen some of the more explicit emails to illustrate the tug we feel between our private and public lives. These emails represent the tensions Andrea experiences as she juggles her roles as a student, a daughter-in-law, a parent, and a wife.

- A: *Sorry it has taken me so long to get back to you about your paper. My father-in-law had open heart surgery Tuesday and he has been up and down each day. He is also an hour away which means I have to travel to be with him*
- A: *I have had a bit of a family emergency...happened today and I cannot leave the kids alone at home. Can you have lunch Tuesday? I want to take you for lunch but the family makes today not look good.*
- A: *I couldn't sleep last night for trying to figure out how I am going to do this, be a mum, make enough money, handle the course load etc. etc. ...*
- A: *I'll be in next week to see you. That is if the weather, sick children and husbands, and the gods allow*
- A: *Would you mind covering my seminar today? I really can't leave home.*

These emails bring to life Georgann's frustrations at trying to fulfill her role as a student, a mother, and a wife.

G: I really don't think my family even notices that I am doing this degree. They just roll along like nothing is going on, still expecting meals, taxi service, an immaculate house, and a social partner. In the end, they will all probably think that doing graduate work is no big deal...that my wife/mom did it for years and I hardly even noticed!

As evidenced through our data, the tensions between our identities as students and our identities as mothers, wives, and daughters require constant negotiation. The need to fulfill the demands of our multiply identified lives knocks up against the reality of the academy. This is the disjuncture between the so-called academic *male* life and that of being a woman. "I discovered that I did not cease to be present and active in the everyday world when I went to work" (Smith, 2005, p. 21).

The final theme centers on the patriarchal structure of the university. The following email excerpts have been chosen to illustrate the systemic pressure we feel as emerging scholars.

A: As for what kind of writer I want to be? I want to be enough of an academic that I do not get kicked out of the academy, but I also want to be accessible. I have seen both sides of this. My dad writes books that are shunned by the academics but the general population reads. My husband writes article after article that academics love but I cannot understand. I do not think I am capable of the academic side.

G: I think a lot about that too...where is the line between accessibility and academic rigour? Who decides what that line is? Why do we have to write one way when we want to write another way? Do we 'perform' the academic discourse in order to finish the degree then do what we want? But there is p and t after that. It seems never ending.

A: I think that maybe I should be a professional TA. I cannot understand one of the readings for this week's doctoral class and I am supposed to be critical and smart and all of those things when reading the readings and then present excellent questions in class.

G: Yep, it is not easy. I keep hearing that and now I find myself saying 'nor should it be'. Weird...I am falling into the trap. I can't tell you it will get better. I don't know that it will. It is a bit better for me now. But I hear from my colleagues horror stories of struggles. I don't know...Read, read, read. Think. Read, read, read.

When we examined our emails we were surprised at how our voices continually expressed feelings of being overwhelmed by the magnanimity of being doctoral students. We struggle with our perceived sensibility pertaining to our choice to pursue an academic career. The emails point to a sense of not knowing: not knowing how to be, how to act, how to interact and how to proceed. A connection to the literature helps to explain our sense of alienation. Zorn (2005) explained the negative effects the imposter syndrome has on individuals. These effects may hinder their teaching and professional development. This may emerge in behaviours such as reluctance to attend conferences, apply for grants or answer student's questions in class. Again the literature findings support our data analysis and affirm our feelings of insecurity (i.e., the imposter syndrome) as women academics. The conditions for women in the academy have not changed radically and that the issues and dilemmas faced by women academics have held constant since the early 1980s when this phenomenon was first identified formally.

Discussion: Fear, Family, and Fellowship

The data reveal three predominant themes. The first emergent theme was a feeling of fear. This theme is consistent with the literature on the imposter syndrome. Most feelings of fear refer to the possibility of being uncovered as a fraud, as an imposter, or as a poser (Clance & Imes, 1974). This is congruent with our findings, as we found ourselves placing our fear of being exposed as fakes against our fears of our own academic incompetency. Competing with the fear of failure was the feeling of being drawn away from our family responsibilities. We both felt entrenched in our maternal roles, as well as our roles as wives, daughters and siblings. The conflicting roles of mother/wife/daughter/sister and the role of student emerged as the second theme (Acker & Armenti, 2004). Fellowship is the third emergent theme. We use the term fellowship as an extension of the term friendship as it encompasses the notions of working and moving towards a shared goal. We found that our fellowship supported our

progress through the beginning of our academic programs (McAlpine & Norton, 2006). In this section of the paper we will discuss how we connected our thematic analysis to the literature through the emails.

Fear

As women growing up in Canada in the 60s, 70s and 80s, we experienced very different decades and very different social expectations around women and education. For Georgann, it was expected that she would attend university, as a privileged young white woman. In her family, the purpose of education was to enhance life experience and to enhance personal development. It was implicitly expected that she would complete an undergraduate degree before settling into family life. Not attending higher education (and by extension not graduating) was not an option for Georgann. Andrea comes from a long line of academics. Her paternal grandfather held a PhD, her father also holds a PhD, an aunt graduated with masters, and her mother an undergraduate degree. Post secondary education was also strongly advocated for in her family. Clance and Imes (1978) identified family dynamics as one of those factors. Typically, families apply attributes to individual children that become self fulfilling. For example, children who are attributed with the characteristics of 'brightness' or 'good students' confront tension between effort and results. The following quote from Clance and Imes described one of the common childhood experiences reported by women who consider themselves imposters.

Although she does outstanding work, she does have to study to do well. Having internalized her parent's definition of brightness as 'perfection with ease' and realizing that she cannot live up to this standard; she jumps to the conclusion that she must be dumb. She is not a genius; therefore she must be an intellectual imposter. (Clance & Imes, 1978, p. 3)

The tensions created between an externally imposed perception of academic ability and an internally imposed perception of self-deficit can contribute to feelings of inadequacy. The academic environment is not a meritocracy. Effort does not always result in success. Women who are expected to be consistently high achieving in academic endeavours may not be able to meet the high standards of academic excellence. Additionally, academic women may be juggling multiple identities that add to the tensions. The next theme, family, examines some of the challenges of playing these multiple roles.

Family

Parallel to the essentialist concept that assumes women are the family caregivers is the patriarchal concept that women will assume the role of primary caretaker of the family and the children. These "old norms" (Acker & Armenti, 2004, p. 18) operate in ways that make it difficult to be both a mother and an academic. Bell (1990) recognized that sex-role expectations of our culture frequently give women conflicting messages about achievement making it difficult to internalize success.

The emails reveal an interesting phenomenon. While it was safe to speak of our struggles to juggle multiple roles in emails, it also seemed to be a covert practice. The emails were the only place we spoke about the tensions we were experiencing while we tried to meet the needs of our families. At work and at school it was implicit that we appear competent and committed to our academic responsibilities. Even though this code of competency is not explicit we both sensed that it was implicit. Neither of us spoke of these tensions with our colleagues, and it seemed easier to hide our conflicts around time and energy than to articulate them in our academic environments.

According to Acker and Armenti (2004), the blending of private and public lives private life and public life is a challenge for women in the academy. They determined that being a mother while being an academic is a predominantly a silent experience. Wolf-Wendel and Ward (2003) found that "there was significant tension existing for women who combine work and family" (p. 121). As the representation of women in academic positions grows, some policies have been implemented to support these dual roles. But, the underlying discourse still pits the tenure clock and the biological clock against one another. "Women feel unsettled and exhausted, trying to keep up with the high academic standards and the care of children" (Acker & Armenti, 2004, p. 12). For women academics to increase in numbers, women students need to be better supported within the academy. If female students are not welcomed in and accounted for, then the move to deemphasize the masculine character of higher education will not begin. We found the potential for this action in the theme of fellowship.

Fellowship

Our data reveal an action of mutual support that addresses the tensions we experience. We chose the term fellowship to capture our social companionship that fosters mutual support. Since this theme encapsulates our ability to confront our imposter feelings we were surprised to find that the early research around the imposter phenomenon does not address the importance of peer support for graduate students. McAlpine and Norton (2006) noted,

a serious problem exists in the academic world, namely doctoral attrition rates in some disciplines. Yet, calls for action have generally been *ad hoc* rather than theory driven. Further, research has not been conceived and implemented with sufficient breadth to integrate factors influencing the outcomes across the societal/supra-societal, institutional and departmental/disciplinary contexts. (p. 3)

We agree with these findings and further support action that emerges from the relevant research on the experiences of doctoral students. Of particular note, we feel the need for a greater sense of community and support from peers in the academy. Devenish, Dyer, Jefferson, Lord, van Leeuwen, and Fazarkerley (2009) in response to this trend of invisibility and disconnect in the academy for doctoral students, noted that the existence of their study group assisted them in remaining engaged with their learning and satisfied with their progression through their respective doctoral programs. Devenish et al. (2009) stated “that the collaborative peer support has been one of the most valuable enablers to our progress. Collaborative support has encouraged and supported a mutual interest in extending our areas of learning, knowledge and participation in the academic world” (p. 61). An important implication in their study is that annual progress reports include recognition of the important role played by fellow students.

We have found that this need is satisfied in our continued support of one another. Of note is that this relationship was self made, not suggested or promoted by those in the academy. It is born of a need identified by both of us. The inherent value of peer support at the doctoral level needs to be supported by higher education institutes if they are to address graduate attrition rates and remain *au courant*. Attrition rates, though varying in numbers across universities and disciplines, remain a concern of university administration. The attrition rate for PhD students in Canada is 50% (Pyke, 2004) and similarly 50% in the United States (Lovitts, 2001). An examination of our data reveal a rhizomatic thread of mutual support, a thread that weaves its way through the public spheres of our lives as students, teachers, and researchers as well as through the private spheres of our lives as mothers, wives, and friends. The findings of this study provoke an extension into the experiences of other doctoral students as they meet the challenges of self concepts in their course of study. Peer support has helped us acknowledge our accomplishments:

G: *Look what I got in my summer intensive...A+ goes to show what I can do when I am only one thing ...a student..not many things...admin assistant, professor, teaching assistant, research assistant, wife, mother, daughter, sister...or maybe it speaks to the support of living in a community of learners*

A: *Is that the course from early in the year that you were waiting on? If so it was worth the wait, what a cute little scholar you are.*

And, peer support has helped us work through some of our anxieties:

G: *Do you think you can come to a lecture this week? I could use the support.*

A: *You must have read my mind as I was thinking that I would try to come this week*

G: *OK, if you come please sit right down in the front row*

A: *If I can come I will come down and talk to you first and then of course I will sit right up front, that is the best place for encouraging feedback.*

The possible reluctance to partake in academic activities, demonstrated in this data, is powerful. This work exhibits the effect and necessary condition of peer support as proactively addressing the very real likelihood of a disinclination to pursue academic paths if not taken up. Again, the theme of a need for community is present, with our support for one another attending to this necessity.

Future work on this topic, which will broaden this analysis of the academy, is full of potential. We anticipate that we will be able to confront the tensions between our own imposter feelings within academe and the perpetual and covert

circulation of a negative discourse. This discourse is fueled by competition for promotion and tenure, for faculty appointments, and for research funding. The social constructions regarding women as mothers/teachers and the patriarchal traditions perpetuate the notion that the academy is a gendered battleground.

This study has settled our thoughts and our self doubts. Through the storying and the re-storying of the narratives and the accompanying research, we have been able to intellectualize the imposter phenomenon as it connects to our lived experiences. We have been able to confront our sense of otherness and develop important strategies to contradict the tensions that we feel. Taking what we have learned, we can now inform support groups, foster peer networks and in general, extend these personal gains from this study to social gains for a wide variety of graduate students. Through the dissemination of our work, other graduate students will be made cognizant of the source of their tensions as they navigate the academy. We recognize that we cannot generalize our experiences into the public sphere, but we also recognize that sharing our experiences may resonate with other doctoral students. We hope that this resonance will support a similar settling of thoughts and self-doubts with our colleagues. We also hope that this study may incite more peer support networks.

In our case, our peer support was integral and informal. Throughout the literature we consulted, there did not seem to be a plethora of current, formalized, academic, peer-support groups. Our informal group is perhaps, with the assistance of this paper, the beginning of such an entity, specialized in that we support one another through the use of technology, email as it were, and not necessarily face-to-face meetings. Email worked well for us, and we attribute this to its dialogic nature. We were able to either instantly share our challenges and triumphs, or reflectively write about our challenges and triumphs, similar to the journaling process. Our previously established relationship as friends and colleagues helped to embed an embodied presence to our emails. We were able to provide one another with our knowledge, experience, emotional and practical help in order that we might 'survive' the academy. It was our initiative, as colleagues, as members of our own self help organization, to meet, to be it on line, as equals, to give each other support on a reciprocal basis. It is hoped that other academics might turn to one another, and as we have demonstrated, support one another through an email relationship, to employ this support. We began as students and teaching assistants together and from there kept in contact throughout our respective journeys. We encourage other graduate students to reach out to one another, keep in touch, and stay connected to the others' experiences, joys, and heartaches.

Implications

There is a need for peer support networks in academia. More research needs to be focused on this new area of exploration. An institutional ethnographic study, starting from the standpoint of women graduate students might help to further reveal the ruling relations that support the imposter phenomenon. By investigating the discrepancies between the actual, every day/every night world of women graduate students and their organized relations with the university, a greater understanding of the social as it extends beyond their experience might be attained. An Institutional Ethnographic study will focus on how women graduate students, who may be experiencing the imposter phenomenon, actualities are embedded in social relations. Institutional Ethnographic work is often a resource for those whose standpoint is taken up. Perhaps then this research could help to better support those budding academics facing this phenomenon.

Throughout this study we have attempted to demonstrate that the imposter phenomenon still exists and still persists in the academy. As evidenced in our email correspondences, we both have struggled to find our place of acceptance with our new identities as female graduate students. We laid out our struggles with fear, family dynamics, and tensions between our 'work' as academics and employees of the institution and our private lives as mothers, wives, and daughters. In utilizing our mutual support, we attempted to counteract the systemic pressures placed upon us in the academy. We hope that we have given a voice to other female graduate students, and extending from that to all graduate students, so that they might take up the work of peer support as they navigate the terrain of the academy.

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