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Imposter Syndrome or a Wrong Diagnosis? - Exploring the Experiences of Graduate Teaching Assistants

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Abstract

Impostor syndrome has attracted research within and outside higher education. Scholars have linked impostor syndrome to reduced productivity, burnout and mental stress; making it an important topic for further studies. Research indicates that impostor syndrome is prevalent in higher education, affecting both experienced academics and Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs); and has been studied as both a behavioural trait and a phenomenon caused by external agents. This distinction in research approach has informed several studies which increasingly emphasise environmental and social factors in

understanding causes of impostor syndrome and seeking solutions that improve mental wellbeing. Yet previous studies fail to adequately differentiate between impostor syndrome and other environmental or socially induced feelings, resulting in misguided support for GTAs. This study addresses this critical gap by investigating the question: “What are the feelings I am experiencing, and can they be considered impostor syndrome?” Our reflective essay uses state-trait theory and a three-stage autoethnographic methodological approach to examine our lived experiences as GTAs in a business school in dealing with impostor feelings. Our findings support earlier studies which state that GTAs are susceptible to impostor syndrome but identify gaps in how impostor syndrome has been categorised in literature. Our reflections revealed feelings of inadequacy and anxieties which though related to our roles as GTAs, could not be classified as impostor syndrome. This finding points to a gap in the support available to GTAs who may not be experiencing impostor syndrome but have anxieties which affect their productivity. Lastly, we also found that there are grey areas between approaching impostor syndrome as a behavioural trait and approaching it as an externally induced condition.

Keywords: Impostor syndrome, higher education, graduate teaching assistants, state-trait theory, autoethnographic methodological approach

Introduction

Following Clance and Imes' (1978) study on impostor phenomenon, impostor syndrome has become an often-researched topic across disciplines (Yang et al., 2024). The interdisciplinary nature of the topic has led to several studies, many of which have been unsupported by theory. Gullifor et al.'s (2024) systematic review of 188 papers on impostor syndrome revealed that over 50% of the papers were not supported by an underlying theoretical framework. They also found that education alone accounted for 24.5% of impostor syndrome studies, signifying the importance of the topic to the education field. Within education, authors are increasingly researching how impostor syndrome relates to graduate students (Chakraverty, 2020; Ferguson & Lockman, 2024; Salehuddin et al., 2024). In understanding the syndrome, scholars have moved away from the narrow approach of understanding impostor feelings as solely a behaviour trait which relies on past experiences, to examine external societal factors as an equally veritable trigger for impostor feelings (Feenstra et al., 2020). This reflective essay is written by three international GTAs with prior post-graduate industry experience in different sectors. In our roles as GTAs, we each encountered self-doubt and other anxieties. For some of us, these feelings were described as impostor syndrome by senior colleagues whom we approached. However, these explanations left unanswered questions, and we each engaged in deep personal reflections and methodologically investigated our experiences using state-trait theory as a framework. State-trait theory is a behavioural framework that makes a distinction between states and traits in personality studies. To guide reflections, we framed a single research question, "What are the feelings I am experiencing in relation to my GTA role, and can they be considered as impostor syndrome?"

This essay follows our experiences in answering this question. The second section of the essay reviews prior literature on impostor feelings. The third section sets out the theoretical framework and is followed by a section on methods adopted in the reflective essay. Findings are presented in the fifth section, and the essay concludes with recommendations and limitations.

Literature Review

Studies on impostor syndrome have adopted differing terminologies and variants in spelling depending on the jurisdictions where the studies have been carried out. The terminologies include impostor phenomenon, imposter phenomenon, impostor syndrome, imposter syndrome, impostorism and imposterism with a lack of agreement on whether to refer to it as a phenomenon, a syndrome, a feeling, a fear or a condition (Bravata et al., 2020; Gullifor et al., 2024). Crucially, calls have been made to exercise caution in using terminologies and labels on impostor feelings (Feenstra et al., 2020). Impostor syndrome has been defined in narrow and broad terms across studies. Most definitions have common elements that qualify them as impostor syndrome include persistent feelings of self-doubt (Pervez et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2024), experience of intellectual phoniness among high-achievers (Clance & Imes, 1978), and fear of exposure for incompetence despite clear evidence of competency (Gullifor et al., 2024).

In this essay, we adopt Bravata et al.'s (2020) definition of impostor syndrome as describing high-achieving individuals who, despite their objective successes, fail to internalise their accomplishments, have persistent self-doubt and fear of being exposed as a fraud or impostor

and struggle with accurately attributing their performance to their actual competence. They attribute successes to external factors such as luck or receiving help from others and attribute setbacks as evidence of their professional inadequacy (Bravata et al., 2020). Their definition offers a rounded approach to impostor studies which is useful to our autoethnographies. In academic research, impostor syndrome has been studied in young professionals and doctoral students. Gresham-Dolby's (2022) writing about young pharmacists noted that new licensees may face the pressure of holding the same license as longstanding pharmacists. Like newly licenced pharmacists, GTAs who are still learning the norms of teaching and adjusting to their role, face pressures associated with performing teaching responsibilities alongside longstanding academics (Salehuddin et al., 2024). For some GTAs, their teaching takes place in universities different from where they completed their undergraduate studies, and they struggle with feelings of being an intruder. Research shows that people in unfamiliar surroundings often do not know what to do, especially when the environment feels hostile and closed to intruders (Gilmore & Harding, 2022).

Impostor syndrome may also arise as a reaction in response to suggestions from colleagues which doubt a person's abilities (LaDonna et al., 2025). Externally imposed impostor syndrome may also present through ethnic minority stereotyping where society or workplaces suggest to a particular group of people that they are impostors (Bravata et al., 2020; Feenstra et al., 2020; Guba, Daoud & Jarbou, 2023; Gutiérrez, 2025). Notably, in an impostor syndrome study among medical professionals, findings showed that some participants described their situations as being excluded by other colleagues and rejected suggestions that they may have been experiencing impostor syndrome (LaDonna et al., 2025).

Another factor which may create impostor feelings in GTAs is financial constraint related stress. Yang et al.'s (2024) study on impostor syndrome in higher education found that there was a positive relationship between the syndrome and intense competition for funding among postgraduate students. His findings are relevant to international GTAs on funded postgraduate programmes some of whom may experience anxieties related to timelines and performance, as any failure to meet up with timelines will impact on the funding available for their studies. Further, GTAs who intend to build a career in academia may respond to the current uncertainties around financial budgets in higher education, reduction of staff strength, and demand for high performance in business disciplines (Hyndman & Liguori, 2023) by voluntarily taking on more responsibilities than they can deliver on, pushing themselves into roles where their inexperience is more pronounced (Pasquinelli, 2024). These environmental and social factors lead not only to impostor syndrome but also to comorbid conditions (Bravata et al., 2020) which are stressors and may be left unaddressed or dismissed as expected impostor syndrome in higher education.

Theory

State-trait theory was employed to explore our individual experiences. Fridhandler (1986) proposed four overlapping but distinct dimensions in understanding the difference between state and trait in research. Fridhandler's (1986) dimensions are duration, continuous versus reactive manifestation, concreteness versus abstractness, and situational causality versus personal causality. Duration differentiates short-lived emotions from enduring emotions. Continuous versus reactive manifestation differentiates continuous episodic moods in response to situations, from discontinuous displays of emotions which

have a stable proneness to react in the same way. Concreteness is applied in understanding a person's state in the here and now while abstractness relates to traits which are consistent over many occasions. Finally, situational versus personality recognises that states are largely situational while traits emanate from individuals, often due to genes or upbringing, without regard to the current situation.

The application of state-trait theory to impostor syndrome studies marks an important addition to scholarly research and the role of context in understanding such feelings (Feenstra et al., 2020; Gullifor et al., 2024). Interestingly, other scholars have developed similar frameworks which differentiate external factors from internal factors in determining what shapes impostor syndrome and assimilation in graduate students (Salehuddin et al., 2024). While researchers have moved away from a dominant focus on traits which had limited understanding of how external factors contribute to the experience (Li, Wang & Yue, 2022; Nori & Vanttaja, 2023), there is scant research on identifying anxieties which may be comorbid conditions but are unrelated to the syndrome. The state-trait theory supports this essay in several ways. First, it clarifies whether the authors' experiences with impostor syndrome were state- induced or triggered by traits or a combination of both dimensions. It also identifies co-existing but distinct feelings of inadequacy which also lead to stress and burnout and deserve attention. In identifying comorbid conditions, it draws attention to the need for tailored support for anxieties experienced by GTAs in their teaching roles which are different from impostor syndrome. Figure 1 shows the theoretical framework applied in our autoethnographies.

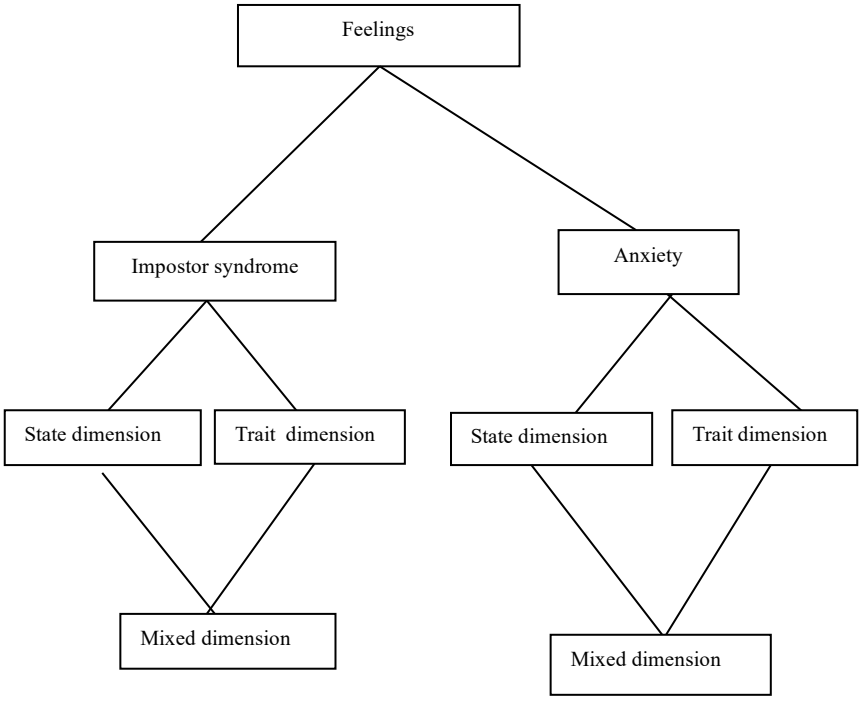

Figure 1: Theoretical framework

Methods

The essay combined 3 autoethnographies of GTAs' experiences with impostor syndrome in their GTA roles. To aid reflection, we adopted the research question "Do I have impostor syndrome, or do I experience distinct anxieties"? We applied the theoretical lens of state-trait theory in our reflections and developed our individual autoethnographies in three stages. First, we each wrote a reflective piece on our personal experience with impostor syndrome. The next

stage was to generate questions from the reflective pieces to probe the feelings or anxieties we each encountered. All questions were pooled, duplicates were deleted, and a total of 11 questions emerged (Appendix i). We individually answered the questions indicating how they applied to our experiences. The final stage was a focus group held on Microsoft Teams where we discussed pre-determined questions. The purpose of the focus group was to aid deeper reflections and allow each author to deeply understand co-authors' experiences and make sense of the written responses. At the end of the focus group, the authors individually coded, interpreted, and analysed each other's responses and the focus group transcript. Our analysis was undertaken theoretically using the dimensions of state, trait, and mixed state/trait construct.

Findings and Discussion

Our findings were categorised under three theoretical dimensions of state, trait, and a mixed dimension of state/trait. The first two dimensions follow the theoretical framings of prior research (Gullifor et al., 2024), while the third was created to further explore feelings which straddled state-based and trait-based impostor research. From the number of codes generated under each dimension, we observed that individually and collectively, impostor feelings were triggered mostly by external factors which were state-based. Although trait-based triggers were noticeably lower than state-based triggers, they were also present. To guide sensemaking of our data, we used Bravata et al.'s (2020) definition as a yardstick to determine whether our experiences qualified as impostor syndrome and under which dimension they fell. Our discussions follow the theoretical dimensions used in analysing our findings.

State dimension

State-induced impostor feelings were dominant in our ethnographies. These were driven by environmental and contextual factors which we considered external to our personalities such as a perceived unreadiness in teaching certain modules, misunderstanding the culture of British classroom settings, getting accustomed to institutional practices and the weight of being PhD candidates.

We each anticipated our GTA positions with confidence carried over from industry experience. This confidence quickly diminished as the realities of the demands of the PhD candidate-GTA dyad set in. Our experience reflects what Ferguson and Lockman (2024) termed as doctoral students' underestimation of the complexity of negotiating multiple, competing demands. Our teaching experience oscillated between modules we had a good grasp of and modules we felt not ready to take on. With the latter, feelings of lacking intellectual know-how and the fear of being found out by the students we taught were high. This was compounded by cultural differences between us and the students, supporting earlier studies that claim GTAs may have insufficient knowledge, be ill-prepared to take on their responsibilities and that international GTAs cultural identities could amplify feelings of outsider status (Zhu & Bresnahan, 2021; Findley, 2022; Yu, 2024). Classroom silence, spatial distancing, and seeming student disengagement (Zhu & Alsup, 2024) were new experiences to us and intensified impostor feelings. At the start of our GTA roles we felt prepared for cultural differences that may arise in classroom settings (Wang & Moskal, 2021; Mohebali & Jangjou, 2024), however, teaching native-English speakers made us more conscious of accents and added more pressure to our desire to deliver effectively.

Other factors outside the classroom, such as PhD commitments, were also major issues that enabled state-induced impostor feelings. The interdependence between PhD programmes and GTA roles makes them arguably inseparable. Anxiety driven by deadlines, performance pressures, and fieldwork overflowed into the frame of our GTA activities and unconsciously, challenges in the former impacted confidence levels for the latter. This was heightened by tensions associated with immigration policies and the desire to not fall short of our research funding expectations. Another contextual factor that acted as a trigger for impostor feelings was delay in understanding institutional practices (Gardner et al., 2019; Li, Wang & Yue, 2022; Nori & Vanttaja, 2023). While programmes were available to transit into our GTA roles within the business school, the demands of our PhD commitments made some of us oblivious and consequently miss some crucial programmes. Listening to each other's experiences helped us identify differences in our personal experiences and how the environmental and social factors we each faced as GTAs built up our anxieties. Our reflections also revealed that external suggestions which equated our anxieties with impostor syndrome created a lacuna in providing support for distinct anxieties faced by GTAs to avoid mental stress and burnout. Crucially, we found a positive relationship between getting accustomed to our GTA roles and reduced anxieties, which challenged the description of some anxieties as impostor feelings as they appeared to be anxieties due to genuine cases of inadequacies.

Trait dimension

Traits were found to play an undeniable role in impostor feelings and other anxieties we witnessed. For two of us, temperamental traits stemming from perfectionism and personal definitions of an ideal classroom gave rise to feelings of inadequacy when we were confronted with student engagement that differed from our expectations. Our reflections revealed that some impostor feelings

emanated from self-imposed targets which given the same societal factors would not have arisen if less demanding targets were set. One of us reflected on how she withdrew from discussing anxieties after being told she was experiencing impostor syndrome. Another author shared her experiences with colleagues and found support for the anxieties she experienced. As such, the role of traits in how impostor feelings are managed was reflected in our different responses to environmental and contextual factors (Fridhandler, 1986). However, none of us reflected as being in a persistent state of intellectual self-doubt nor described our past achievements as luck (Pervez et al., 2021).

Mixed dimension

Some of our findings straddled between state-based and trait-based impostor feelings. For instance, we each experienced dwindling confidence before students at the start of our GTA roles and attributed this to personal factors, but discussions with older GTA colleagues helped us understand this experience as external. It was notable that our responses to the dwindling confidence differed in scale and underscored our different traits. The variance in our responses showed how a solely external trigger for impostor feelings could mislead different people to identify it as an internal trigger. Experts have noted the difficulty in making the distinction between state-based and trait-based experiences in understanding behaviour (Allen & Potkay, 1981). Invitations have also been made to approach impostor syndrome studies as not falling solely under individual psychology but more holistically to accommodate and account for social structures and role relations (Pearlin, 1989; Mullangi & Jagsi, 2019; Phelan, 2024). This provides scope for further studies to expand impostor syndrome research to adequately recognize grey areas between state-based and trait-based.

Overall, our findings supported the treatment of impostor syndrome as being not solely trait induced but also a response to social realities. Our experiences included impostor feelings but also a wider range of anxieties. However, our reflections were strongly underpinned by clarity on anxieties which though appeared as impostor syndrome, did not neatly fit into its definitions. Elements such as attributing past success to luck were visibly absent. What was also crucial was that we each identified genuine intellectual gaps which could not be dismissed as feelings of being an intellectual fraud. Our collective reflections during the focus group signified we had evolved from previous deep-seated anxieties but were also more conscious of the absence of support available to anxieties which might present as impostor syndrome but are different.

Recommendations

Learning for students, including postgraduate researchers in higher education, can be unsettling (Oluyide, Mazimbe & Adeyemo, 2025), and psychological stress may intensify when they assume both student and tutor roles. At the individual level, a behavioural audit and change of mindset is required. GTAs need to reframe irrational and maladaptive beliefs about success and competence. A reorientation of how we view failure is essential in self-reflection. Having compassion for self and others could shape how GTAs define themselves. Self-sabotaging behaviours like perfectionism and self-deprecating talk (Edwards-Maddox, 2023; Junious, 2024) which can lead to impostor feelings, should be dealt with. At an institutional level, our study corroborated earlier studies that GTAs could experience some difficulties in settling into the institutional culture. While several institutions such as ours may have robust programmes to help GTAs settle into their role, GTAs' inexperience might lead to them not

prioritising such sessions. A recommendation would be to organise refresher sessions all through the course of the GTA programme. This will help prepare more GTAs for teaching in multicultural environments by enhancing confidence and raising awareness levels of classroom culture (Byrom, 2018; Zhu and Alsup, 2024).

Conclusion

Impostor syndrome continues to be an important topic for GTAs and academics. The importance of the topic has attracted a range of studies employing diverse approaches, terminologies, and theories. Studies in higher education have pointed to the peculiarity of GTAs' liminal position as a trigger for impostor feelings. The state-trait theory has emerged as a useful lens in understanding the syndrome across research settings. The distinction between impostor feelings triggered by external factors which may be environmental and social, and impostor feelings triggered by internal factors which are behaviour traits, is crucial. Importantly, some impostor feelings straddle state-based and trait-based factors and need to be recognised as such. As international GTAs, the navigation of complex realities including settling into a new culture, learning to read the British classroom, understanding student behaviour, maintaining funding timelines and not falling behind PhD programme deadlines easily compounds anxieties and pushes such GTAs towards impostor syndrome. To make sense of their experiences, the authors employed rigorous methods to reflect and relay their stories. Findings pointed to comorbid conditions which are often considered to be impostor syndrome and addressed as such. The implication of generalising different feelings of inadequacy or anxiety as impostor syndrome is an absence of tailored support for those feelings which co-exist with impostor syndrome but

are distinct. There is scope for further research on misdiagnosed anxieties which leave underlying triggers unaddressed.

Limitations

This study reflects the experiences of 3 international GTAs in a Business School in the United Kingdom. The small sample size impedes the generalisation of our findings. Future studies may explore the experience of a wider population of GTAs, including GTAs in other faculties. A study that includes both GTAs and institutional leaders could be a pragmatic way of creating a collaborative intervention system that better supports GTAs experiencing impostor syndrome and comorbid conditions.

Competing Interests

OA and SO are Postgraduate Pedagogies journal reviewers. The first author has no competing interests to declare.

Data Availability

Data used in this paper cannot be shared due to privacy reasons.

Ethics and Consent

Authors confirm that ethics approval was not required for this paper.

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Appendix i

QUESTION BANK

1. Can you describe a specific situation where you questioned your abilities as a GTA?
- *Looking back, do you believe those feelings reflected a genuine skill or knowledge gap that needed to be addressed, or were they impostor feelings despite having adequate competence?*
- *What helped you distinguish between the two, if anything?*
2. Were there specific institutional practices, teaching engagements or moments in your GTA journey that intensified your feelings of inadequacy?
- *How did these feelings change (or not change) as the situation evolved or ended?*
- *Do you experience these feelings consistently across all contexts, or are they tied to particular situations?*
3. As an international GTA, how did your cultural background, linguistic identity, or status as a non-native English speaker influence your teaching confidence and how you interpreted feedback from students and colleagues?
4. Did you experience impostor phenomenon in your pre-GTA work role?
5. What has your experience with anxieties as a PhD/GTA been?
6. Did any particular experience with the PhD programme lead to anxieties in your GTA role and vice versa?
7. Did any particular experience as an international student outside of work lead to anxieties in your interactions with colleagues or students?
8. Did you seek or receive support from colleagues?
9. Did you have phases of feeling misunderstood?

10. Did you have any experience outside the Higher Education environment that made you feel your place in the UK was questioned by others?
11. Do you frequently evaluate yourself against other GTAs? What impact do these comparisons have on your PhD journey, teaching efficacy, and self-esteem?