



Dismantling doubt: A study on impostor phenomenon among women academics in South Africa

By

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Dissertation presented in partial fulfilment for the degree of Master of

Industrial Sociology at the University of Cape Town

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Acknowledgements

The two years I've spent completing the writing of this paper have likely been two of the most transformational years of my life. When I applied to complete a Master's in Industrial Sociology at a completely new University, move across the country and somehow keep my job, I'm not quite sure what I thought I was signing up for, but to say I was wrong would be an understatement. All I knew was that I had a passion for amplifying the experiences of women both in and out of the workplace. Those just like me, those vastly different from me, some unsure of themselves, younger, older and everything in between. I hope the findings of this research continue and can reach every woman who has dedicated their love and tears to success and remind them that they are the flourishing botanical garden of their watering.

It would have been impossible for me to complete this paper without the love and care of those who supported me through this journey.

To my mother, Jumoke Ojetimi, thank you for always worrying about me, even when I forgot to worry about myself. You are my internal voice when my head feels scattered, and I hope that one day I can be a fraction of the woman and mother you are.

To my father, Wale Ojetimi, our passion for knowledge and education has always pushed me further than I could have ever gone on my own. Without your motivation, I may have never pushed myself to pursue this degree. Thank you for standing with me even when I felt that my legs would collapse.

To my supervisor, Dr Tamlynne Meyer, from the moment I saw you on the faculty website, I knew that you were the only person who could help me pursue this topic with the required sensitivity, tenacity and thoughtfulness. Thank you for all the guidance throughout this entire process. Your understanding and knowledge on this topic never ceased to amaze me, and I truly could not have made my way through this project without your patience and guidance.

To my sisters, Tinu and Amirah, thank you for putting up with many a breakdown over the last two years, for being a shoulder to cry on or a stern kick in the back when I went off the rails. Some days, it feels like you know me better than I know myself, and you have and will continue to be my heart living outside my body.

To my friends, thank you for keeping me sane, every laugh, walk, hike, coffee and quiet dinner has reminded me of my humanity when the days felt cold and dark. The love of friendship pulled me out every time I needed it most with an embrace that I can only describe as comparable to feeling the sun on your skin after a long Cape Town winter. I will never forget the moments we've shared during this time, and I will cherish our love forever.

Lastly, thank you to all of the women who trusted me enough to share your lives with me, I hope I did us justice.

Abstract

Impostor phenomenon is a psychological phenomenon manifested through feelings of self-doubt about intellectual competence, skills, and accomplishments despite evident success among individuals. This results in a constant fear of being exposed as a fraud, hindering their confidence and prospects for professional advancement. Transformation initiatives in South African higher education institutions aimed at increasing the representation of women and black people have seen a notable shift in the demographics of the profession. However, this shift has also coincided with rising levels of impostorism among these groups, highlighting the complex interplay between societal changes and individual experiences within academic spaces. Existing research has predominantly examined the impostor phenomenon from individualistic and psychological perspectives. However, a notable gap remains in understanding the sociological factors influencing the impostor phenomenon. The researcher argues that history, context, and culture are key in understanding the manifestation of impostorism among women and blacks in the academic profession of South Africa. This study contributes to this lacuna by conducting a sociological exploration of the impostor phenomenon among women academics at the University of Cape Town. In-depth qualitative interviews with women academics, underpinned by feminist intersectionality and socio-cultural and organisational cultural framing, illuminate the interplay of societal structures and organisational cultures in shaping experiences of impostor phenomenon. This not only provides a more complex and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon but also sheds light on the continued existence of inequality and marginalisation in the academic profession.

Keywords: *Impostor Phenomenon, Higher Education, Women in Academia, Intersectionality, Organisational Culture.*

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Definition of Key Concepts

Impostor phenomenon: Impostor phenomenon, also known as impostor syndrome, refers to the internal experience of doubting one's abilities and feeling like a fraud despite evident success.

Gender: Gender is understood as a socially constructed concept encompassing the roles, behaviours, and values associated with being a woman, man, girl, or boy. This is to be separated from sex, which refers to biological and physiological traits.

Race: For the purpose of this study, race is understood as a social construct which refers to different groups of people and how they are classified by their physical appearance characteristics, such as skin tone and hair texture. Specifically considering the history of the concept in South Africa, these classifications have been used as a means of oppression during the colonisation and apartheid eras. In the past, South Africa divided the country's population into four main racial groups: white, native (black African), Indian, and coloured. In the modern day, these racial categories continue to be relevant for statistical purposes and individual social identities (Van Staden et al., 2023).

In the context of this study, the racial categories will be understood as African, coloured, Indian, and white. The term "black" collectively refers to both African and coloured groups.

Class: Class in South Africa is closely linked to the country's apartheid history and is shaped by legal and social constructs that categorise people based on their relationship to existing economic systems and, in many ways, can be associated with socio-economic status. This pertains to factors such as employment status, access to financial assets, and the level of educational attainment. Formally and colloquially, this system organises society into lower, working, middle, upper-middle, and upper classes.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Introduction

The inspiration for this research originated from a personal conversation I had with a friend, a young Indian woman pursuing a research fellowship while completing her PhD¹ at one of South Africa's leading universities. Our friendship dates back to our undergraduate and honours years at the University of Witwatersrand (WITS), where we bonded over the shared challenges of navigating academic life as black women with ambitious goals. Over the years, I have watched her journey through her postgraduate studies and now her PhD. Despite her remarkable accomplishments, she spoke about the difficulty of seeing herself as someone worthy of the respect and status that should accompany the role of a PhD candidate. Her reflections revealed the unique struggle of striving to be taken seriously and seen as deserving of respect and authority, yet constantly doubting her place in the academic community. This conversation intensified my desire to explore the impostor phenomenon within academia, particularly how it is experienced by women in South Africa.

1.2. Background and Context

In South Africa, the total number of women working in academia has increased from 31.1% in 2005 to 36.8% in 2020. However, the percentage of women-authored academic publications remained 12% to 14% lower than that of male academic professionals (Fox & Paine, 2019; Mouton et al., 2022). Statistics show that between 2007 and 2021, women have been underrepresented in vice-chancellor roles within South African universities, with an average of only 23% of these top positions held by women (Moodly, 2021). Moodly (2021) indicates that in recent years, the representation has remained low, with just six women vice-chancellors out of the 26 public universities in the country (23%) as of July 2021. Looking specifically at the years 2020, 2019, and 2016, the percentage was even lower for all three years, with a rate of only 15.38% of vice-chancellors being women (4 of 26 in the country). This is a slight drop from 2014, when women made up 16% of vice-chancellors (4 out of 25), underscoring the persistent gender imbalance in academic leadership. As of 2023, only five South African universities have been headed by women vice-chancellors (Department of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, 2023; Moodly, 2021). These statistics highlight the fact that despite decades of being present in the academic field, women

¹ Doctor of Philosophy degree

are still regarded as outsiders to many parts of academic institutions (Fox & Paine, 2019). Further research on gender inequality in South African higher education institutions has indicated the reality of gender-based biases and imbalances in senior and management roles where women are constrained, as they are continually regarded as inferior to their male counterparts (Council on Higher Education, 2017; Mdleleni, Mandoyoli & Frantz, 2021; Riordan & Louw-Potgieter, 2011). The higher education sector further mirrors the problematic and very gendered power relations that exist in broader South African society (Akala, 2019; Mdleleni, Mandoyoli & Frantz, 2021). In 2017, the Council for Higher Education detailed that out of 3 040 senior managers² in higher education, less than half (44.76%) were women. Women held 29% of total professor positions, 41% of associate professor positions, and 46% of senior lecturer positions (Council on Higher Education, 2017; Riordan & Louw-Potgieter, 2011). However, when it came to lecturer and junior lecturer roles, women made up the majority. This data reveals that even though women make up the majority of staff, their presence in top executive positions is notably limited (Council on Higher Education, 2017; Mdleleni, Mandoyoli & Frantz, 2021; Riordan & Louw-Potgieter, 2011).

Feelings of inadequacy and deficiency are an almost inherent characteristic of academic institutions, as universities in many historical contexts have been places where elitism and privilege have divided societies (Kahlenberg, 2010; Lorbeer, 2020; Wheeler-Bell, 2017). This can be related to established systems in academic environments, such as preferential treatment of legacy applicants³ and meritocratic-based admission processes, which disregard the impacts of socio-economic status, race, or gender in assessing admissions. Both of these systems favour the process of reproducing the upper class while fostering feelings of self-doubt in members of marginalised communities (Lorbeer, 2020; Wheeler-Bell, 2017). Universities as institutions (like in many other professions) were not established with women or people of colour in mind, as indicated by the history of elitism in academia (Fox Tree & Vaid, 2022; Wheeler-Bell, 2017).

Women of all races, particularly black people, were largely excluded from obtaining a higher education, as these spaces were founded by and for white men (Fox Tree & Vaid, 2022; Lewis, 2019; Thelin, Edwards & Moyon, 2021). This has also contributed to the sustained

² Senior managers in higher education include positions such as Deputy Vice-Chancellors, Deans, Heads of Department, and Directors, which are typically responsible for strategic decision-making and leadership.

³ Applicants who have at least one parent as a previous attendant of a school

beliefs of the white male academic as the default of meritorious academic outcomes. For this reason, the integration and equal recognition of women and people of colour into the academic workforce have happened at a menial pace (Fox Tree & Vaid, 2022; Lewis, 2019; Thelin, Edwards & Moyen, 2021). This can also be seen by the processes of the Centre for Higher Education and Equality Research, which has highlighted the multifaceted barriers women continue to encounter, including the failure to recognise and nurture their talents, the gendered division of labour within academia, and the persistent perception that men are more suited to leadership roles (Riordan & Louw-Potgieter, 2011; Shoher, 2014). For instance, women are less likely to submit academic work due to these responsibilities, a factor that diminishes their research output and opportunities for career advancement (Riordan & Louw-Potgieter, 2011; Shoher, 2014).

In South Africa, despite the Employment Equity Act of 1998 and the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment Act of 2003, which were designed to promote gender and racial equality, women in academia still face significant challenges. Organisations such as the Higher Education Resource Services South Africa (HERS-SA) have been instrumental in promoting women's advancement in higher education, providing mentorship, networking opportunities, and training to help women educators achieve their career goals (Shoher, 2014). Still, the lack of women's leadership remains a widespread issue. This research makes a contribution to the field of sociology, particularly within the domains of women in academia and sociology of professions scholarship, an area of work with limited exploration in South Africa and the broader Global South (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Cope-Watson & Betts, 2010).

At UCT, the impostor phenomenon is a prevalent issue that has affected academic staff as well as students across various academic levels. Examples of this include the experiences of women such as Sherlyn Gabriel and Reitumetse Kholumo, who have both recently graduated from their PhD programmes and revealed, "I suffered from a bad case of impostor phenomenon and even to this day, I catch myself feeling like I am not smart enough to get this degree" (Davids, 2022; Sunday, 2021). This is in line with the experiences of other graduates such as Reitumetse Kholumo and Tinéo Galela, who describe their early days at UCT as "daunting" and having struggled with their feelings of not belonging (Davids, 2021, 2022). These narratives showcase the prevalence of the impostor phenomenon at UCT across

women at many levels of academia and are important for understanding how widespread the impostor phenomenon is at the institution.

A notable gap in women's experiences in South African academic institutions remains. To date, no studies have been conducted on the impostor phenomenon among women academics in South Africa. However, research on the impostor phenomenon within South Africa was conducted by Fischer (2012). The author explored the impact of work and gender identity on the link between perceived inclusion and the impostor phenomenon experienced among individuals working in South African organisations (Fischer, 2012). This research was quantitative in nature and approached from an industrial psychological perspective. The study employed a cross-sectional survey design and was assessed using its psychometric properties, descriptive statistics, and Multi-Group Structural Equation Modelling (MG-SEM) (Fischer, 2012). The results of the author illustrated that for male employees, their work identity and gender identity are strong predictors of their feelings of intellectual inadequacy and unworthiness, whereas, for women employees, their feelings of intellectual inadequacy and unworthiness are predicted by their perceptions of inclusion (Fischer, 2012).

The aim of this study is to explore the sociological factors contributing to the impostor phenomenon experienced by women academics. In the highly competitive field of academia, where self-confidence, networking, publication, and other forms of public acclaim are crucial to success, the impostor phenomenon can be particularly detrimental, as feelings of impostorism have been described as emotionally taxing and may cause individuals to avoid accepting and pursuing opportunities that would advance their careers (Molatseli, 2022). Impostor phenomenon is not simply an abstract phenomenon; it has significant implications for the professional advancement, mental health, and overall well-being of individuals experiencing it (Parkman, 2016). Women in South Africa navigate a unique set of challenges, such as social cohesion struggles and the social, economic, and political reconstructions that are characteristic of post-apartheid South African society (Segalo, 2015). They also face gender-based violence, poverty, limited access to political power, and mobility in the workplace (Bangani & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2020). These contextual factors can exacerbate feelings of impostorism, making women in academia in the country a unique and critical population to study.

1.3. Problem Statement

Many individuals, particularly in high-status positions or occupations, experience feelings of inadequacy or anxiety concerning their current positions in society despite their material success. This experience is often referred to as ‘impostor syndrome’ or ‘impostor phenomenon’⁴ (Clance & Imes, 1978). People with expressions of impostor phenomenon possess an internalised belief that their achievements are a result of circumstances or a systematic error. These individuals fear being exposed as fraudulent or incompetent in their roles (Clance, 1986). In recent years, the use of the term has been popularised in both academic literature as well as media discourse, including discussions on the negative impacts on individuals as well as its disproportionate commonality among women and members of marginalised ethnic and racial groups (Feenstra et al., 2020; McGregor, Gee & Posey, 2008; Peteet, Montgomery & Weekes, 2015).

The impostor phenomenon has also been found more prevalent in individuals who believe to be working in positions where their indicators of success, such as career advancement, recognition, or other indicators of prestige, do not always accurately align with the quality of their work efforts (Llorens et al., 2021; Parkman, 2016). These contexts are related to the circumstances of many women working at academic institutions where, due to organisational structures, cultural beliefs, and other barriers to entry, they have maintained a minority of positions in academic spaces (Fernandes et al., 2020; Llorens et al., 2021). Higher education institutions have been described as having an isolating and aggressively competitive culture, therefore becoming environments that can cultivate feelings of impostorism among both students and staff (Parkman, 2016; Ray et al., 2019). As the impostor phenomenon (IP) is most experienced by individuals with high achievement orientation and perfectionist tendencies, more often, it is identified in individuals with more advanced degrees (Parkman, 2016). As academic culture is characterised by strict yet vague performance targets, inconsistent support, and intense competition for research funding, the academic environment for women can, in many ways, foster feelings of insecurity and self-doubt (Fox & Paine, 2019; Parkman, 2016).

⁴ For the purpose of this study, this paper will be making use of the term ‘imposter phenomenon’ (IP) or impostorism as opposed to impostor phenomenon. This conceptualisation better allows the researcher to acknowledge the role of how context and social structures create the feeling of being an ‘impostor’ as opposed to framing it as an experience which arises solely from within the individual (Feenstra et al., 2020).

Research focusing on the intersection of IP, ethnicity, and race is significantly less inquired in comparison to the number of studies that have been conducted on the relationship between the impostor phenomenon and gender (Bravata et al., 2020; Clance et al., 1995; Cokley et al., 2013). Studies such as that of Cokley et al. (2013) have identified the presence of impostorism among historically disadvantaged populations; however, very few findings have indicated that levels of impostorism differ between races. Research has also presented environments where white women exhibited lower levels of impostor phenomenon than individuals from historically disadvantaged backgrounds, while individuals from historically disadvantaged backgrounds further experienced higher levels of stress and self-identity, which are also associated with the impostor phenomenon (Bravata et al., 2020; Clance et al., 1995; Cokley et al., 2013).

A few studies have highlighted the disproportionate vulnerability of women of colour to feelings of impostorism (Clance et al., 1995; Cokley et al., 2013; Peteet, Montgomery & Weekes, 2015). In particular, IP in the context of South African academia is a notably underexplored field despite the fact that South African women in these environments face many challenges. Like other historically male-dominated professions, such as law and medicine, academia imposes high standards of professional legitimacy and authority, which can exacerbate feelings of impostorism among those who have been historically excluded. By engaging in this research, the researcher aims to amplify the voices of women who share similar struggles and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the impostor phenomenon within South African academia.

1.4. Research Questions

The research questions for this study are as follows:

1. How do women in academia conceptualise their experience of the impostor phenomenon?
2. How do gender roles and societal expectations shape experiences of the impostor phenomenon?
3. How do race and class intersect to influence experiences of the impostor phenomenon?
4. How do organisational culture and hierarchies influence experiences of the impostor phenomenon?

5. What coping mechanisms do women employ to navigate the impostor phenomenon?

1.5. Significance of the Study

As IP is rooted in the field of clinical psychology, much previous research on the impostor phenomenon has been analysed from a personality trait and individualistic perspective (Pákozdy et al., 2023; Ross & Krukowski, 2003; Sawant et al., 2023). Much of the existing research on the impostor phenomenon has been conducted in Global North countries, such as the United States of America and Australia (Liu et al., 2021; Muradoglu et al., 2022). Additional studies have explored the impostor phenomenon among women in academic institutions in the United States (Muradoglu et al., 2022; Vaughn, Taasobshirazi, & Johnson, 2020), as well as the experiences of women working in STEM faculties at universities in India (Chakraverty, 2022). These studies often frame impostor phenomena through individualistic lenses, focusing on personality traits and psychological factors (Clance & Imes, 1978; Heymann & Carolissen, 2011; Liu et al., 2021; Sakulku, 2011).

Hawley (2019) critiques the psychological conceptualisation of impostorism as being narrowly framed. The author argues that this framing has implications for those experiencing the impostor phenomenon, as it reduces the phenomenon to irrationalities such as biases and failures, creating a lack of self-confidence and fostering a self-induced negative self-perception (Hawley, 2019). The impostor phenomenon can also be understood as an epistemic phenomenon involving how individuals believe and feel they are part of an extended community, particularly whether they perceive themselves as epistemic peers with those around them. Even when evidence is available to indicate epistemic parity, individuals with impostor phenomenon may choose to ignore or downplay it (Hawley, 2019).

McGee et al. (2022) found that black students were more likely to question their academic abilities and view themselves as impostors in what they described as “racially hostile” academic environments. This highlights how historically disadvantaged groups experience the impostor phenomenon differently from how it is often described in dominant psychological literature, particularly in academia and other professional spaces that are historically Western, patriarchal, and white-dominated. These experiences are linked to structural and intersectional prejudices (McGee et al., 2022). Conceptualisations of the impostor phenomenon as an epistemic phenomenon further aid in understanding that it is not

self-induced but externally brought about through interactions within one's epistemic community. Feelings of exclusion from the epistemic community can shape beliefs about the impostor phenomenon (Mills, 2019).

The prevalence of the above-mentioned perspective has paid limited attention to how socio-cultural factors may influence experiences of impostorism, especially in Global South countries such as South Africa, where historical and structural inequalities strongly influence professional environments. Further studies have sought to evaluate evidence to guide the diagnosis, predictors, and treatment of the impostor phenomenon. However, the argument highlighting the sensitivity of impostorism to sociological factors and social environments, such as the intersection of being a woman working in the field of academia, is a perspective of analysis that has not been carried out in South Africa (Bravata et al., 2020; Cohen & McConnell, 2019).

Much of the research to date outside of South Africa has focused on university students (Pákozdy et al., 2023), mental health professionals and the medical field (Chen, 2020; Freeman & Peisah, 2022), and intimate relationships (Alvarado, 2015). Several studies have been conducted looking at perceived inclusivity in the workplace in the South African context (April, Ephraim & Peters, 2012; Daya & April, 2014; Yssel et al., 2007). However, no studies have specifically investigated experiences of impostorism among women academics. Other studies examine the relationship between racial and ethnic identity and impostor phenomenon (Erwing, 1990; Lin, 2008) or the relationship between perceived inclusion and impostor phenomenon (Fischer, 2012) and therefore bear little relevance to this study.

While existing research has highlighted gender biases and structural inequalities affecting women in South African academic institutions (Naicker, 2013; Zulu, 2021), there remains a significant gap in studies specifically examining the impostor phenomenon within this context. Current literature shows that women are underrepresented in leadership positions within tertiary institutions (Department of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, 2023), reflecting broader societal gender imbalances (Akala, 2019; Mdleleni, Mandoyoli & Frantz, 2021). This study contributes to filling this lacuna by examining how sociological factors contribute towards the experiences of impostor phenomenon among women academics.

Existing research on the impostor phenomenon in South Africa reveals its significant impact on professionals, particularly black women, in ways that often hinder career growth and confidence in leadership roles. Research by Nakazwe-Masiya, Price and Hofmeyr (2017) on the effects of the impostor phenomenon on measures of assertiveness in women professionals was conducted on working professionals in South Africa from different industry sectors, industries, and job functions. The quantitative study used questionnaires distributed online. The instruments included the Clance Impostor Phenomenon Survey and selected elements of the Adaptive and Aggressive Assertiveness Scales. Findings indicate that feelings associated with the impostor phenomenon, such as fear of failure and attributing achievements to luck rather than personal capability, are widespread, with approximately 85% of South African professionals reporting moderate to high levels of these feelings. These findings point to a pattern: the phenomenon can be identified more significantly in women professionals in South Africa and bears a moderately negative relationship to assertiveness (Nakazwe-Masiya, Price & Hofmeyr, 2017).

Molatseli (2021) conducted a cross-sectional, qualitative study with 18 black women in the ICT sector in South Africa. The aim was to understand the internal and external drivers of the impostor phenomenon. The sense of not belonging, indicated by these findings, is exacerbated by a workplace culture that has historically excluded them, contributing to black women being reluctant to pursue senior roles. Moreover, the pressure and expectations in competitive, performance-focused fields such as ICT and other STEM industries in the country tend to amplify feelings of impostorism (Molatseli, 2021).

1.6. Chapter Summary

This chapter has provided an overview of the impostor phenomenon, tracing its origins in clinical psychology and how it has evolved into a widely discussed phenomenon affecting individuals across diverse fields. The chapter sets the foundation for exploring these sociological dimensions while emphasising the need to address structural gender imbalances and the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles.

Subsequent chapters will focus on how these dynamics contribute to the impostor phenomenon among women academics in South African higher education, as well as the theoretical framework, methodology, and findings of the study. The next chapter will be a literature review.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

The previous chapter provided an introduction and background to the study. This chapter will review literature relevant to this study. This literature review begins by defining the impostor phenomenon and moves to explore workplace dynamics, challenges in male-dominated industries, and the specific gender disparities present in South African academic institutions. It then explores how gender stereotypes, social roles, and notions of professional legitimacy shape the workplace dynamics in professional academic spaces. Finally, the literature turns to existing literature on the influence of South Africa's unique historical context and ongoing transformation efforts in higher education. Given the multifaceted nature of the impostor phenomenon, it is essential to examine it through a holistic lens, considering the interplay of individual, social, and institutional factors that contribute to its development and persistence. By doing so, research can better uncover the deeper structural and cultural mechanisms that perpetuate the impostor phenomenon.

2.2. Conceptualising Impostor Phenomenon

Impostor phenomenon, also known as the impostor phenomenon, was identified in 1978 by Clance and Imes, who conducted therapeutic sessions among high-achieving women in Atlanta, USA. The sample consisted of primarily white, middle, and upper-class high-achieving women. Despite objective evidence of material success, the women believed that they were frauds and feared being exposed as impostors in their respective personal and professional contexts (Clance & Imes, 1978; Sakulku, 2011). Impostor phenomenon thus entails a persistent belief or feeling that one's achievements are not deserved, leading the individual to attribute success to external factors rather than acknowledging their abilities, thus preventing high-achieving women from experiencing genuine pride and joy in their accomplishments (Levy, 2022; Parkman, 2016).

One of the findings from the Clance and Imes (1978) study was 'the impostor' as an extended representation of individuals experiencing the phenomenon. This involves a process of self-differentiation, where individuals feel a self-perceived lack of knowledge or capability, coupled with a fear of having their perceived shortcomings exposed (Clance & Imes, 1978; Pool, 2022). This often results in behaviours such as flattery or aligning ideas with those of

others, avoiding objections when ideas conflict with their own beliefs, or using charm to mask their own perceived inadequacies (Pákozdy et al., 2023; Pool, 2022; Ross & Krukowski, 2003). When success does occur, charm may even be used to downplay accomplishments, further intensifying feelings of impostorism (Parkman, 2016; Pool, 2022). The behaviour is perpetuated by difficulty internalising past successes and diminished confidence in replicating them, leading to fear and reduced self-efficacy (Parkman, 2016).

In its initial conception, the impostor phenomenon was believed to only affect women in their professional capacity, but expansions in the research have illustrated the experiences of impostorism being observed in both men and women (Langford, 1990; Topping, 1983). It is also identified in both university students (Sakulku, 2011; Sawant et al., 2023) and across different professional occupations: medical professionals (Chen, 2020; Sakulku, 2011), mental health professionals (Clark et al., 2022), and academic professionals (Parkman, 2016). Studies have also identified the impostor phenomenon across a variety of different contexts and cultures (Pákozdy et al., 2023; Ross & Krukowski, 2003; Sakulku, 2011). Cokley et al. (2013) highlight the prevalence of impostorism among historically marginalised groups; however, evidence suggesting significant differences in the levels of impostorism across different racial groups remains limited.

Research on the impostor phenomenon concerning ethnicity and race is less extensive than studies examining its relationship with gender (Bravata et al., 2020; Clance et al., 1995; Cokley et al., 2013). Cokley et al. (2013) identified impostorism among minority populations, but few findings have shown significant differences in impostorism levels across races. In some contexts, white women exhibited higher impostor phenomenon levels than members of historically disadvantaged ethnic groups, while members of minority groups faced elevated stress and identity challenges, which are also associated with the impostor phenomenon (Bravata et al., 2020; Clance et al., 1995; Cokley et al., 2013).

Research has highlighted the unique vulnerability of women of colour to feelings of impostorism (Clance et al., 1995; Cokley et al., 2013; Peteet, Montgomery & Weekes, 2015). Similarly, a study by Maji (2021), which looked at experiences of the impostor phenomenon among women software engineers in India's IT sector, further revealed that the impostor phenomenon can, in many ways, be attributed to an individual's upbringing and the nature of the paternal care they received (Maji, 2021). This includes behaviours such as not receiving praise, being compared to siblings, and a lack of optimism in their potential as children,

coupled with strictly enforced gender values, all of which serve as prominent antecedents of the impostor phenomenon (Maji, 2021).

People struggling with self-doubt may attempt to manage their feelings of inadequacy by exhibiting behaviours of denial, disengagement, or overworking in order to try and temporarily relieve these feelings, despite the fact that it likely will not address the primary causes of their distress in the workplace (Hutchins, Penney & Sublett, 2018). These behaviours often lead to further feelings of incompetence, emotional fatigue, and lower levels of job satisfaction. This emotional exhaustion leads to a cycle of attempting to mask their internalised weaknesses, reinforcing feelings of inadequacy and diminishing their job satisfaction (Hutchins, Penney & Sublett, 2018).

An important distinction to be made when taking a critical look at previous literature on the impostor phenomenon is the fact that there is no definite answer to the question of whether the impostor phenomenon is prevalent only among ‘high-achieving’ individuals or if it is an experience shared by anyone who faces difficulties internalising their success (Harvey, 1981). In line with Harvey’s (1981) proposition, Gravois (2007) presents a similar line of thought, stating that it is likely that 70% of individuals, regardless of their success level, will face feelings of impostorism at least once in their life, making the phenomena not only limited to high-achieving individuals.

2.2.1. Characteristics of Impostor Phenomenon

Clance (1985) went on to further their initial conceptualisation of IP by proposing six characteristics exhibited by individuals experiencing IP. These characteristics are not described as universally present in all individuals who experience IP nor is there a definitive threshold for how many of the characteristics must be exhibited to classify someone as experiencing the impostor phenomenon. The six key characteristics commonly associated with IP are (1) impostor cycle, (2) perfectionism, (3) super-heroism, (4) atychiphobia⁵, (5) denial of competence, and (6) achievementphobia⁶ (Clance, 1985; Huecker et al., 2022). These characteristics were introduced by Clance (1985) and further elaborated on by Huecker et al. (2022). The *impostor cycle* describes a pattern in which individuals, when faced with new tasks or responsibilities, either overprepare or procrastinate, perpetuating self-doubt and reinforcing the belief that their success results from extraordinary effort rather than actual

⁵ Refers to fear of failure

⁶ Refers to a fear of success

skill (Clance, 1985; Huecker et al., 2022). By overpreparing, individuals experiencing IP exist in a reality where, in order to achieve the same goals as those around them, they need to work harder, whereas when facing their own procrastination, they face the feeling that their ‘last-minute’ preparations will be a further cause for them to be exposed as a fraud (Clance, 1985; Huecker et al., 2022). Once they complete the task, they feel a short-lived sense of success or triumph (Clance, 1985; Huecker et al., 2022).

Perfectionism involves setting impossibly high standards as an extension of the many hyper-competitive and perfectionist behaviours that individuals with IP impose on themselves (Clance, 1985; Huecker et al., 2022; Stoeber, 2018). The perfectionist tendencies of impostor phenomenon-prone individuals can lead to the sacrifice of their own personal interests for a falsely perceived act of higher purpose as well as the creation of impossible benchmarks that increase the harmful feedback loop associated with their need to be the best (Clance, 1985; Huecker et al., 2022).

Superheroism reflects an inclination to overextend oneself to prove worth, which leads to excessive workloads and heightened stress. Individuals in this stage have a tendency to overprepare for tasks while frequently volunteering themselves for additional workloads that can further harm their mental health (Clance, 1985; Huecker et al., 2022).

Atychiphobia induces anxiety about potential mistakes, as individuals worry about being exposed as frauds (Clance, 1985; Huecker et al., 2022). This characteristic manifests when individuals are facing achievement-related tasks that may be internally or externally imposed and is associated with anxieties surrounding a fear of being shamed if they fail or underperform in a specific task and are thus exposed as an impostor among their peers (Clance, 1985; Huecker et al., 2022).

Denial of competence describes the tendency to downplay achievements, attributing success to luck or external help rather than one’s abilities. This characteristic relates closely to the characteristic of perfectionism, as individuals with IP tend to disregard their talents; therefore, denial of competence correlates to a tendency to attribute their success to external factors as well as easily internalise failures (Clance 1985; Huecker et al., 2022).

Achievemophobia can lead individuals to resist recognition, as they worry that success may raise expectations and increase pressure (Clance, 1985; Huecker et al., 2022). In a similar line of thought to atychiphobia, this describes an individual experiencing impostor phenomenon’s

difficulty in recognising their own success (Clance, 1985; Huecker et al., 2022). Together, the aforementioned characteristics form a complex profile, reinforcing the internalisation of self-doubt and creating barriers to confidence and fulfilment (Clance, 1985; Huecker et al., 2022).

2.2.2. External Factors Contributing to Feelings of Impostor Phenomenon

Despite the internal feelings experienced by individuals with IP, it is also important to understand the external factors, such as societal stereotypes and social hierarchies, that shape individuals' feelings of IP. Previous research suggests that negative stereotypes related to gender and historically disadvantaged groups are more prone to experiencing IP, particularly in environments where they are underrepresented (Eagly, Wood & Diekmann, 2000; Feenstra et al., 2020). For women, societal expectations of leadership, typically associated with masculine traits such as assertiveness, can contribute to feelings of inadequacy, while negative stereotypes about racial and ethnic groups can trigger fears of conforming to racial prejudices (Feenstra et al., 2020). These feelings of impostorism are intensified by the internalisation of social divides along the lines of race, gender, and class (Clance & Imes, 1978; Parkman, 2016).

Traditional psychological models of IP, which focus on individual traits, fail to acknowledge the role of social context in impacting feelings of impostorism and the social expectations of an individual's environment, which contributes significantly to feelings of impostorism (Cohen & McConnell, 2019; Fujie, 2010). In environments such as academia, where high performance is prioritised, marginalised individuals may feel greater anxiety due to stereotype threats, intensifying their feelings of impostor phenomenon (Cohen & McConnell, 2019; Moss-Racusin et al., 2021; Murphy & Taylor, 2012).

The psychological pattern of feeling like a 'fraud' and constant self-doubt is intensified by the lack of representation for women and black people in historically male-white-dominated professions. This highlights how IP is not only internally cultivated but is also influenced by existing systemic issues (Mullangi & Jagsi, 2019). Despite being a psychological phenomenon based on traits and self-perceptions, IP should be considered a social process, as it is shaped by social interactions and can be altered depending on the rules, cultures, and incentives of different social environments (Cohen & McConnell, 2019; Merolla et al., 2012).

As previously highlighted, earlier definitions of the impostor phenomenon have overlooked how racism, socio-economic status, and other biases shape the experience of black women in the workplace (Tulshyan & Burey, 2021). By maintaining a focus on the internal feelings of self-doubt, historical conceptualisations of IP neglect the importance of historical and societal contexts, which contribute to feelings of impostorism as opposed to shedding light on the exclusionary workplace cultures that women face each day (Tulshyan & Burey, 2021).

Nadal et al. (2021) argue that IP is not only an individual experience but is also deeply shaped by systemic and internalised oppression, particularly for historically marginalised groups. Using the intersectionality theory, Nadal et al. (2021) explain how microaggressions, stereotype threat, and IP are interconnected, showing how repeated microaggressions can lead to internalised oppression (Nadal et al., 2021). Microaggressions, often subtle or unintentional discriminatory acts, serve as reminders of existing social hierarchies and reinforce exclusion, particularly in spaces such as academia and the workplace (Nadal et al., 2021). These experiences, heightened by stereotype threat – the fear of validating negative stereotypes tied to one’s identity – further deepen feelings of self-doubt and anxiety among individuals, which heightens their experiences of impostorism. According to Nadal et al. (2021), the internalisation of these oppressive forces causes individuals to question their competence and belonging, making them more vulnerable to IP. The intersectional model proposed by Nadal et al. (2021) stresses the importance of analysing IP through a multifaceted sociological lens that acknowledges the role of structural oppression, historical disadvantages, and situational contexts (Nadal et al., 2021).

2.3. Impostor Phenomenon in the Workplace

Previous research on the impostor phenomenon in the workplace has primarily been approached from the perspectives of social psychology (Steele, Spencer & Aronson, 2002) and organisational psychology (Drabowicz, 2017; Hutchins, Penney & Sublett, 2018), as well as trait and psychiatric perspectives (Ross & Krukowski, 2003). These studies have identified some of the influences of the phenomenon on the mental health of workers, including emotional distress, anxiety, embarrassment, fear, and shame (Drabowicz, 2017; Hutchins, Penney & Sublett, 2018; Ross & Krukowski, 2003). Furthermore, the studies showcase how individuals with high levels of impostor phenomenon have reported depleting the resources necessary to avoid psychological strain because of their reliance on avoidant coping

mechanisms, leading to low job satisfaction and higher levels of emotional distress (Drabowicz, 2017).

Individuals experiencing IP express a constant need to strive for perfection in their work while tending to second-guess themselves (Parkman, 2016; Stoeber, 2018). These behaviours often result in lower levels of job satisfaction and feeling detached from the organisation, all while maintaining high engagement in work tasks to prevent being exposed as incompetent (Leary et al., 2000; Parkman, 2016). One of the implications of the impostor phenomenon on women in the workplace is the challenge it presents to employees as they attempt to progress and elevate their careers and are consequently faced with feelings of inadequacy when comparing themselves to their coworkers with more experience (Arnett, 2005; Fischer, 2012). These insecurities can have a damaging effect on the individual's potential for future career development (Fischer, 2012).

An experience particularly common among women employees is that a lack of women role models in senior positions leaves women employees at lower levels of organisations questioning whether they have the ability to hold positions of power when they are rewarded with senior positions (Fischer, 2012; Hoang, 2013). Some even go as far as to express that they fear their promotion was awarded based on their personality, affirmative action policies, or quotas needing to be met rather than their achievements or experience (Fischer, 2012; Hoang, 2013).

2.3.1. Gender and Impostorism in the Workplace

Gender stereotypes and social roles further add to the complexity of impostorism among women. The gendered division of labour often relegates women to roles requiring caregiving or supportive tasks, reflecting societal expectations, thus influencing professional dynamics and creating barriers for women to achieve senior-level positions (Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). For example, women who demonstrate collaborative leadership qualities in male-dominated sectors may face heightened pressure to perform in ways that align with traditionally masculine traits, such as assertiveness and competitiveness, which are often valued in leadership roles (Gardiner & Tiggemann, 1999; Khilji, 2021).

The tension between societal expectations and professional identity can amplify feelings of impostorism as women attempt to reconcile perceptions of competency with often contradictory gendered expectations (Hilton & Von Hippel, 1996; Khilji, 2021). Furthermore,

occupational segregation, which restricts women to lower-ranking, lower-paid roles, intensifies the sense of detachment and the belief that they are “impostors” within their fields.

Social role theory adds that men and women may be steered into stereotypical roles, reinforcing perceptions that men are more suited for leadership, while women’s roles are undervalued, limiting career advancement and confidence (Eagly & Carli, 2018; Skelly & Johnson, 2011). Gender stereotypes and social roles shape workplace dynamics and significantly influence women’s trajectories for career advancement, often reinforcing the idea that men are more suited for leadership roles while women’s roles are undervalued. Recognising how these stereotypes influence women’s self-perception and professional identity is essential in addressing the challenges they face in the workplace.

A similar perspective on the lived experiences of inequality in the workplace further highlights how societal norms related to race, class, and gender influence how women are able to make sense of their professional identities and opportunities for advancing their careers (Khilji, 2021). Stepping into workplaces, women must face how societal expectations will influence their actions, resulting in constant negotiation and navigation of existing structures, which often discriminate against them. These inequalities reinforce feelings of doubt and impostorism, as they are forced to challenge the structural barriers that are used in many professions, including academia, to maintain gender-related limits to career progression and leadership roles (Khilji, 2021). Understanding these dynamics underscores the need to integrate gender stereotyping into a broader comprehension of workplace barriers, helping to reveal how societal expectations fuel feelings of impostorism among women striving to advance in their careers.

2.4. Professional Academic Environments

The role of an academic involves the practice of engaging in teaching and research and contributing to the advancement of knowledge within their specific field and academic community. In this way, a large part of being an academic is acting as a knowledge bearer and fostering growth and innovation in their areas of expertise (Suddaby, Bévort & Strandgaard Pedersen, 2019). Central to the identity of an academic is the pursuit of legitimacy, which forms an essential, albeit implicit, part of the job. Legitimacy can be understood as a reputation-based reflection of “cultural alignment, normative support, or consonance with relevant rules or laws” (Suddaby, Bévort & Strandgaard Pedersen, 2019). It is both a marker

of success and a means of professional advancement, and yet it remains an ongoing process, often without a clear endpoint (Gonzales & Terrosky, 2016; O'Meara et al., 2018).

To establish legitimacy in academia, one must navigate institutional norms and practices that shape professional expectations. A key mechanism for achieving this is through professional endorsement from colleagues. Gonzales (2014) describes how endorsements create a social framework defining who or what is worthy of recognition and what behaviours are deemed appropriate. For historically disadvantaged groups in academic spaces, such as women, black people, the disabled, immigrant communities, and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, it is important to consider what difficulties they might encounter while establishing legitimacy in a field that is still heavily gendered, racialised, and rankist⁷ (O'Meara et al., 2018; Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). The institutional practices, barriers to entry, and professional interactions in “rankist” work environments continue to reproduce inequalities, further reinforcing the lack of inquiry in academic environments (Bird, 2011; O'Meara et al., 2018). To cultivate inclusive academic environments, it is important to identify and address the mechanisms perpetuating inequality across various facets of academic careers, especially in areas with high impact and limited administrative oversight (O'Meara et al., 2018).

According to New Institutional theorists, university spaces primarily operate in such a way that institutions are assessed based on the legitimacy, prestige, and status of the individuals they can attract as well as their ability to retain them (Bowman & Bastedo, 2011; Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; O'Meara et al., 2018). This perspective underscores the importance of institutional scripts in shaping perceptions of legitimacy, heavily informing the practices of research universities. Within the university space, people absorb specific assumptions regarding what is considered legitimate academic work, shaping their perspectives of professional legitimacy throughout their careers (Austin, 2002; O'Meara et al., 2018).

In the male-dominated academic environment, women face social and institutional barriers that hinder their career advancement opportunities. These structural impediments often prevent women from accessing the same resources and recognition as their male colleagues. The social structures that are characteristic of academic environments present external forces

⁷ The term “rankist” refers to a system or culture that perpetuates discrimination and inequality based on hierarchical rankings, such as those related to socio-economic status, race, gender, or disability. In the context of academic environments, rankism can manifest as unequal treatment, lack of opportunities, and exclusionary practices that reinforce existing power dynamics (O'Meara et al., 2018).

that foster feelings of impostorism among women in these contexts, and these interactions lead women to question their abilities and self-worth (Cohen & McConnell, 2019; Feenstra et al., 2020).

In many descriptions, a legitimate academic professional is one who not only produces research but also produces research that is deemed valuable, an assessment which is analysed by the amount of work an individual has collaborated on as well as where their work is published (O'Meara et al., 2018). When individuals examine the professional legitimacy of other members of the academic community, perceptions of legitimacy among colleagues can significantly impact an academic's social capital and professional standing. Gonzales, Martinez and Ordu (2014) note that for academics, acquiring social capital is a resource generator, which often translates into greater autonomy within their roles. Furthermore, academics who do not fit into this script of professional expectations may face increased scrutiny, suggesting that autonomy acts as another key indicator of legitimacy in these spaces (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; O'Meara et al., 2018). However, it is crucial to acknowledge that not all academic staff members have equal access to establishing and maintaining professional legitimacy.

Research illustrates that the prevalence of biases based on gender, race, religion, and sexual orientation can influence how academics are evaluated within professional contexts (Yudkin et al., 2016). These dynamics of professional legitimacy underscore the intersectional challenges women face in navigating and attaining professional legitimacy within academic settings. When the definitions of legitimacy are defined by biases, individuals who do not fit into these norms may feel inadequate and question their position in academic spaces, reinforcing impostorism. IP in these contexts can also be understood by its relationship to rejection and burnout in these environments, and how the culture of academia amplifies these feelings of self-doubt.

Success in an academic profession cannot be achieved without a certain level of peer critique and evaluation, often associated with a culture of scrutiny and rejection (Jaremka et al., 2020). This competitive environment is one where feelings of inadequacy are able to thrive, and emotional fatigue can result in burnout (Jaremka et al., 2020). This is especially true for individuals from previously disadvantaged backgrounds, as the pressures they encounter in the workplace intersect with other societal and historical biases based on race, gender, and socio-economic class (Jaremka et al., 2020).

2.5. South African Academic Institutions

This section focuses on South African academic institutions.

2.5.1. Historical Transformation in Higher Education

The history of tertiary institutions in South Africa and the process of transformation that occurred in the post-apartheid era is a foundational aspect of how the impostor phenomenon is experienced by contemporary women academics (Gmerek, 2018; Morrell et al., 2020; Sadiq et al., 2019). Before 1994, black South Africans lacked legal protection and endured persecution, segregation, and discrimination based on their racial classification. Apartheid policies systematically denied job and educational opportunities to black individuals and imposed strict limitations based on both race and gender (Mabokela & Mawila, 2004). Furthermore, the apartheid system in 1948 aimed to separate education across all racial categories, with tertiary education being one of the most explicit methods of racial discrimination utilised by the apartheid government (Gmerek, 2018; Van den Berghe, 1966).

The curriculum of racially segregated higher education was intended to reproduce the principles of apartheid. The courses provided for all race groups were designed to promote the idea of white superiority and entrap people of colour into the inferior roles that they were thought to fulfil in an apartheid society (Gmerek, 2018; Sehoole, 2013). In line with these intentions, universities dedicated to black racial categories experienced varied degrees of financial support, often possessing poorly stocked libraries and laboratories (Gmerek, 2018; Sehoole, 2013). During this time, management bodies and student organisations initiated discussions and presented recommendations for the incoming government to consider, with the expectation that political settlements preceding majority rule would pave the way for a democratic South Africa, characterised by equitable economic, social, and educational opportunities for all (Lefa, 2014).

The discourse on desegregating higher education and transformation laid the objectives of the Higher Education Act (Act 101 of 1997). The Higher Education Act aimed to reshape the educational landscape. This legislation was designed to overhaul previous educational

programmes and align them more closely with the country's social, economic, and developmental needs (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2015). This legislative framework aimed to overhaul existing educational programmes as a crucial tool for gender transformation in tertiary education. By fostering inclusivity and equal access to education, the Act sought to address the historical discrimination that marginalised certain groups, including women, in academic spaces (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2015; Department of Education, 1997). However, the translation of policy objectives into tangible outcomes remains reliant on the effective implementation of transformative measures.

Prior to the 1994 election, there was widespread demand for transformation in South Africa's tertiary education system to ensure equal access to education and work opportunities for all previously disadvantaged groups (Lefa, 2014). In this context, the Higher Education Act catalyses the reshaping of institutional cultures and practices to promote equity, diversity, and inclusion. Nevertheless, despite these progressive aims, gendered power dynamics and cultural biases remain persistent within academia and continue to undermine the professional legitimacy, career advancement prospects, and experiences of impostor phenomenon of women scholars.

2.5.2. Barriers to Gender Equality in South African Academia

In the male-dominated academic environment, women face social and institutional barriers that hinder their career advancement opportunities. These structural impediments often prevent women from accessing the same resources and recognition as their male colleagues. The social structures that are characteristic of academic environments present external forces that foster feelings of impostorism among women in these contexts, and these interactions lead women to question their abilities and self-worth (Cohen & McConnell, 2019; Feenstra et al., 2020).

Gender imbalances in academia have been highlighted as a significant challenge both globally (Stamarski & Son Hing, 2015) and within the South African context (Nakazwe-Masiya, Price & Hofmeyr, 2017) and can be explained by a multitude of barriers confronting women. Studies have noted that South African women working in academic fields often feel invisible and voiceless (Riordan & Louw-Potgieter, 2011; Shoher, 2014). Existing academic environments reflect values, priorities, and norms that align with the historical experiences of white men (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Cope-Watson & Betts, 2010).

This male-dominated structure shapes both the language and the criteria for performance, embedding values traditionally associated with male-dominated professions, such as competition, individual research productivity, and visibility, into the benchmarks for career advancement. These “objective” measures, while widely accepted, disproportionately disadvantage women by undervaluing contributions that are more often associated with women's participation, such as mentorship, administrative roles, and collaborative work (Barnes, du Plessis & Frantz, 2022; Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; O’Meara et al., 2018).

Women in academia face a multitude of challenges that stem from both societal expectations and organisational culture. Some of these challenges include familial responsibilities, biased institutional structures, and a lack of access to social and professional networks. To fully understand these issues, it is essential to explore the key challenges women encounter in both academic and professional contexts.

Familial responsibilities

Societal gendered division of labour places familial responsibilities, such as housework and caregiving, on women, limiting their ability to fully engage in academic duties. Liu et al. (2021) point out that women are twice as likely as men to leave their academic careers for family-related reasons. This imbalance is compounded by the demanding and competitive nature of academia, an environment originally shaped to accommodate individuals able to prioritise work above family, much like other traditionally male-dominated fields such as law and medicine. This structure disadvantages women, who are more often expected to assume caregiving roles (Ceci & Williams, 2011; Meyer, 2021).

Biased institutional practices

Women are often assigned undervalued administrative tasks and have fewer opportunities for research, which stymies career progression (Naicker, 2013). In an environment where research productivity is a primary criterion for promotion, women find themselves at a disadvantage, particularly as they are often excluded from high-profile projects or prestigious publications (Cope-Watson & Betts, 2010). These compounded challenges reveal a structural imbalance that reinforces gender disparities in academia.

The emphasis on individual accomplishments, high-impact research output, and self-promotion reflects a framework that is not only male-centred but also misaligned with

the collaborative, relational, and supportive roles that women more frequently undertake. As a result, women often find their contributions, which are essential to academic life, going unrecognised, further reinforcing gender disparities in academia. The criteria for success⁸ extend beyond everyday academic responsibilities and into the research and publication process, where male researchers are frequently perceived as more authoritative. This bias can hinder women's access to key opportunities, such as publication and research funding. Liu et al. (2021) revealed significant gender disparities in Australian Research Council (ARC) funding applications, where men were notably more successful than women despite the latter representing a substantial portion of applicants.

Academic institutions, their policies, and the underlying structures have been historically formulated from a male perspective, which continues to exclude the experiences and contributions of women, particularly those who have entered academia during periods of institutional transformation (Cope-Watson & Betts, 2010). This foundation upon which academia is laid not only excludes the perspectives of women but also reinforces performance-based values that are steeped in meritocratic ideals. In such environments where intelligence, high productivity, and success are highly valued, women and other marginalised groups may experience heightened pressures to meet these standards. The resulting anxiety, fuelled by stereotype threat and the fear of failure, exacerbates feelings of impostorism.

Social and professional networks

A further obstacle for women in academia is the exclusion from male-dominated social and professional networks. In all professional settings, networks are an important avenue for maintaining and establishing professional legitimacy as well as avenues for professional advancement (Yudkin et al., 2016). These networks, however, frequently provide men with more favourable workloads and better access to collaborative research opportunities (Liu et al., 2021). These networks enable male academics to enhance their visibility in the field and build stronger portfolios, thereby advancing their careers at a faster pace than their female counterparts (Liu et al., 2021). As a result, women are often left out of critical collaborations and high-profile projects, making it harder for them to compete for academic recognition and opportunities. One can also identify similar behaviours in other professional spaces, as women struggle to access dominant social networks due to institutional biases, societal norms around gender roles, and barriers to leadership positions, further indicating slower career

⁸ As discussed in Section 2.4

progression and reinforcing gender inequalities in the workplace (Meyer, 2021). Addressing these challenges requires not only structural change within institutions but also a broader societal shift in the perceptions of gender roles and responsibilities.

This literature review provided a comprehensive foundation for understanding the impostor phenomenon, starting with its definition and moving into the workplace dynamics and specific challenges faced by women in male-dominated industries, particularly within South African academia. It explored how gender stereotypes, social roles, and ideas of professional legitimacy shape the culture of academic spaces. Additionally, the review highlighted South Africa's unique historical and structural context, examining how these intersecting factors continue to perpetuate the impostor phenomenon among women in academia. What emerges is that the impostor phenomenon is deeply multifaceted, stemming from the interplay between individual experiences, social expectations, and institutional structures. To unpack these complexities further, it is important to position the literature within a broader theoretical framework.

2.6. Gender Legislative Policies in South African Workplaces

To fully understand the scope of gender discrimination in South Africa, it is essential to look at the broader legal and policy framework intended to promote gender equality. This section on the past and existing legislative policies on gender in South African workplaces aims to contextualise the expansions of this study. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) enshrines gender equality as a core human right. Section 9(2) of the Bill of Rights outlines the importance of legislative and other measures aimed at advancing individuals disadvantaged by unfair discrimination. However, despite these legal safeguards, challenges remain in advancing women into senior management and decision-making positions. The Employment Equity Act (EEA) prohibits unfair discrimination across multiple grounds, including gender and race (Republic of South Africa, 1998). Despite this legislative framework, gender-based discrimination remains a persistent issue for women in South Africa. Many still face significant barriers in the workplace that hinder their advancement and prevent them from reaching senior positions.

In South Africa, the Constitution acts as the supreme law of the country and therefore lays the foundation of all other pieces of legislation and policies. Goko (2013) notes that the government has mandated that women should occupy 50% of senior and top management

roles, yet women continue to be disproportionately represented in lower-level positions, limiting both their earning potential and decision-making power (Bangani & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2020). The South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) reported in 2017 that violations of gender equality remain prevalent, further illustrating the marginalisation of women within human resource processes, such as recruitment, promotion, and career management. This highlights the ongoing disconnect between policy and practice, as women in South Africa continue to face substantial obstacles in their pursuit of workplace equality.

2.7. Theoretical Underpinnings

While much of the existing research on IP is rooted in psychological theories, this study takes a multidisciplinary sociological approach, using feminist intersectionality and socio-cultural and organisational culture theory. Feminist intersectionality focuses on how gender, race, and class intersect to create distinct challenges for women, particularly for women of colour (Crenshaw, 1989). Socio-cultural theory adds another layer by highlighting how social interactions and cultural contexts shape identity and foster internalised feelings of inadequacy. Finally, organisational culture theory examines how academic norms and power structures create environments where women may struggle with belonging and legitimacy. Together, these frameworks offer a broader lens for understanding how structural and cultural forces drive the persistence of the impostor phenomenon in academia.

Given South Africa's history of inequality and ongoing transformation, it is essential to explore how gender, race, and class intersect with socio-cultural and institutional factors to produce experiences of impostorism. The motivation behind choosing these frameworks lends to the fact that in the South African context, it is important to consider the various perspectives that shape lived experiences. The researcher argues that by employing a holistic framework, the feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy that often affect women in academia can be better understood.

2.7.1. Intersectionality

Intersectionality reveals how different systems in society, such as gender, class, and race, mutually strengthen or weaken one another (Crenshaw, 1989; Mokoena, 2020). It describes the complex ways in which social identities produce both experiences of privilege and marginalisation to various degrees, as well as recognising not only the differences between

different groups but also the various experiences that exist among members of the same group (Crenshaw, 1989; Smooth, 2013). Crenshaw conceptualised intersectionality as a response to treatments of women as a homogenous group, ignoring the various other social identities which define power hierarchies and variations in each individual's lived experiences (Crenshaw, 1989; Mokoena, 2020; Smooth, 2013). Her coining of the term aimed to illustrate the different identities and positionalities of people that shape their experiences, particularly those that manifest in the lives of black women (Crenshaw, 1989).

Other authors have commended intersectionality as a framework for its assertion that no single social category contributes more significantly to a person's lived experience than another, but instead emphasises that variations in social identity exist in dynamic relationships. (Bowleg, 2012; Crenshaw, 1989; Moolman, Ndinda & Stephens, 2022; Smooth, 2013). South Africa's history has long upheld a model of professional success centred on white, male, and heterosexual norms (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Cope-Watson & Betts, 2010) – a standard that has been maintained despite transformation initiatives to redress past imbalances (Carbado et al., 2013; Luiz & Terziev, 2024).

When the intersection of race and gender is universalised, it negates the unique disparities from this overlap of race, class, and gender in South African society (Naicker, 2013; Zulu, 2021). The universalising of women's experiences as black or women does little to affirm their uniqueness and their struggles (Naicker, 2013; Zulu, 2021). When conducting any study in the South African landscape, intersectionality must be further acknowledged, as black women, for example, experience compounded discrimination, as they face not only gendered biases but also racial exclusion, which amplifies their feelings of invisibility and self-doubt (Crenshaw, 1989; Naicker, 2013; Zulu, 2021). These additional layers of marginalisation are a consequence of intersecting structural inequalities that have persisted post-apartheid, perpetuating a work culture that undervalues the contributions of women and black women in particular (Riordan & Louw-Potgieter, 2011; Shober, 2014). Applying an intersectional framework allows for a more nuanced understanding of how institutional practices, societal expectations, and historical legacies of oppression collectively affect women differently based on their specific social identities (Crenshaw, 1989; Nakazwe-Masiya, Price & Hofmeyr, 2017; Starnski & Son Hing, 2015).

2.7.2. Socio-cultural Theory

Socio-cultural theory sheds light on the importance of social interactions in shaping an individual's development and experiences. The idea is that knowledge acquisition primarily takes place through social interactions, particularly where individuals engage with those perceived as possessing greater expertise or skill. This may lead to the development of a sense of inadequacy in one's capabilities (Jeong et al., 2022; Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). Here, learning is seen as a social process that unfolds within cultural contexts, including interactions within peer groups and professional environments such as the workplace (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). These communal environments foster the creation and exchange of knowledge through interpersonal engagement.

2.7.3. Organisational Cultural Theory

Organisational culture consists of the values, beliefs, systems, and rules (spoken and unspoken) that define an organisation. Schein (2004) argues that organisational culture is a major impediment to change; therefore, certain cultures remain well embedded despite transformation initiatives. Understanding the culture of professional spaces is integral to understanding the experiences of those who navigate the space daily. According to Schein (2004), organisational culture operates through various layers, including (a) artefacts and behaviours, (b) espoused values, and (c) underlying assumptions. Artefacts and behaviours refer to the visible aspects of culture, such as explicit policies and symbolic actions, reflecting the prevailing norms (Schein, 2004). Espoused values are the unspoken principles shaping the behaviours and decisions of academic individuals, essentially guiding the atmosphere within the institution (Schein, 2004). Underlying assumptions in this context represent the subconscious beliefs about the academic world and individuals' roles (Schein, 2004).

To fully grasp the intricacies of how culture influences phenomena such as the impostor phenomenon, it is essential to incorporate the insights provided by Johnson and Scholes (1999) through their 'Cultural Web' model. The Cultural Web model enhances Schein's (2004) framework by including seven interrelated components that explore organisational culture: (1) the paradigm (the core mission and values of the organisation), (2) organisational structures (hierarchies and reporting lines), (3) symbols (branding and physical spaces), (4) rituals and routines (established practices and meetings), (5) stories (narratives that reflect the organisation's values), (6) control systems (mechanisms for monitoring and regulating

behaviour), and (7) power structures (distribution and exercise of power) (Johnson & Scholes, 2002).

Schein's (2004) and Johnson and Scholes's (2002) models allow for an understanding of how academic culture sustains and amplifies the challenges confronting women. From a deeper sociological perspective, individuals are influenced by the values, systems, and rules that are enforced by the organisations in which they are employed (Chalmers & Brannan, 2020; Schein, 2004). The organisational model framework underscores the complexity and depth of organisational culture, recognising its influence on employee perception and behaviour within an institution (Chalmers & Brannan, 2020; Meyer, 2021; Schein, 2004). Using the lens of organisational culture enables this research to shed light on how established norms and behaviours contribute to the establishment and maintenance of IP among women in professional settings.

In the context of academia, this model is particularly relevant for understanding how institutional norms and power dynamics contribute to the gendered experiences of women, including the development of the impostor phenomenon. For example, the paradigm of academic excellence and meritocracy may reinforce feelings of inadequacy among women who do not see themselves reflected in the traditional symmetries of academic success (Cope-Watson & Betts, 2010). The rituals and routines of academia, such as the emphasis on publishing and grant acquisition, may disproportionately burden women, who are often also navigating familial responsibilities (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Cope-Watson & Betts, 2010). Moreover, the power structures within academic institutions, often dominated by men, can perpetuate gendered assumptions about competence and authority, further entrenching the challenges faced by women in these environments.

2.8. Chapter Summary

The aim of this chapter was to contextualise the IP and provide foundational knowledge on the topic. It specifically focused on conceptualising the impostor phenomenon, the impostor phenomenon in the workplace, professional academic environments, the history of South African academic institutions, gender legislative policies, as well as the theoretical frameworks of intersectionality, socio-cultural theory, and organisational cultural theory. The next chapter discusses the research design and methodology employed in the study.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

3.1. Introduction

The preceding chapter reviewed literature pertinent to this study. This chapter will discuss the research methodology used in the study.

3.2. Research Design

To investigate women academics' experiences of impostorism, this research adopted a qualitative phenomenological approach. Phenomenological research seeks to understand and describe the lived experiences and feelings of individuals regarding a particular phenomenon, with the aim of providing depth and detail (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). The aim was to capture the multifaceted nature of these experiences from the perspective of the women who have engaged with them (Bouzioti, 2023; Neubauer, Witkop & Varpio, 2019). Conducting research in this manner is well aligned with the nature of this research topic, as it places great emphasis on the way that the individual understands the meaningfulness of their world (Neubauer, Witkop & Varpio, 2019). This design involves the exploration of personal narratives, which allows women to express their experiences in their own words.

Most existing studies on IP have used quantitative methods (Chen, 2020; Clarke et al., 2022; Fischer, 2012; Freeman & Peisah, 2022; Pákozdy et al., 2023). While these quantitative approaches have undoubtedly provided valuable insights, the scarcity of qualitative data on this phenomenon creates a beneficial opportunity. The utilisation of qualitative research represents a vital methodological contribution to the study. By employing qualitative research, this study sought to grant voice to women, enabling them to share their lived experiences and narrative accounts of impostorism. This approach differs from the conventional reliance on response scales and numerical analysis derived from survey responses (Bravata et al., 2020; Fischer, 2012; Hutchins, Penney & Sublett, 2018). In doing so, this research captured the richness, nuances, and contextual complexities of IP, offering an insightful perspective that complements the quantitative data prevalent in the existing body of research.

3.3. Research Methodology

This section explains the research methodology used in this study.

3.3.1. Data Collection

The data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews⁹ with 16 women academics employed at the University of Cape Town. The interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes each. Semi-structured interviews use a guide of interview questions developed to cover the topic under investigation (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). This research method is flexible and allows engagement between the researcher and women participating in the study to elaborate and follow new lines of inquiry that develop (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Semi-structured interviews provide flexibility, enabling both the researcher and the women to collaboratively construct knowledge and generate valuable insights (Mason, 2002). Through this approach, the researcher cultivated an organic dialogue and developed themes and topics relevant to the women's lived experiences, some of which may not have been previously considered. The interviews provided a deeper understanding of the world of women academics, capturing intricate aspects that may be missed in structured interviews, surveys, or questionnaires (Adams, 2015; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Mason, 2002). This data collection method highlighted how the women's knowledge, perspectives, and interpretations serve as the key elements shaping their experiences, forming the basis of the qualitative research study (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Mason, 2002).

With the permission of the women participants, the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim (McMullin, 2023). Audio recording and transcription ensured that the researcher did not have to rely solely on her recollection abilities or scribed notes, ensuring a more rigorous data-capturing and analysis process (Im & Chee, 2006; McMullin, 2023). All the interview recordings were stored in a password-protected folder on a device only accessible to the researcher. All the interviews were conducted online through Microsoft Teams and recorded directly on the platform for transcription at a later stage. This helped the researcher stay focused on what the women were saying and allowed her to immediately capture any initial insights or noteworthy reactions that emerged during their discussions (Im & Chee, 2006; McMullin, 2023). These memos allowed the researcher to reflect on the data,

⁹ See Appendix A

raise questions about its direction, and process any emotional responses. In conducting these interviews, she aimed to foreground the voices of the women and articulate their lived experiences. The researcher was particularly cognisant of the intersectional realities of South Africa and approached her analysis with an acute awareness of the racialised and gendered dynamics at play and how they intersect (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Cope-Watson & Betts, 2010; Davis, 2008).

3.3.2. Sampling

This study adopted purposive sampling, as the aim was to recruit a selection of women who would provide the study with detailed insights into the IP. Snowball sampling was also used, as one of the women contacted the researcher directly after learning about the study. The study included women of various racial categories between the ages of 30 and 65, and employed as academics¹⁰ at the University of Cape Town¹¹. Impostorism is often observed among individuals with higher levels of education, such as Master's and PhD holders, as well as professionally high achievers (Sakulku, 2011; Vaughn, Taasoobshirazi & Johnson, 2020). Hence, a key criterion was that each participant had to possess a minimum qualification of a master's degree. This criterion ensured that the women could offer valuable insights as they were regarded as accomplished individuals. Additionally, the women were required to have at least one year of professional experience working in academics at any public or private South African university. By concentrating on this group, the research explores how the pressures and expectations at the highest levels of education and a knowledge-bearing industry contribute to the development and manifestation of the impostor phenomenon. The researcher collected detailed information about the specific fields of study of the women, current departments, and roles at the university; however, some of this information has been omitted from this report. The researcher decided not to disclose this data, given the relatively small size of some academic departments. Revealing such information could compromise the anonymity of the women by making it easier to cross-reference their biographical details with their shared experiences. The faculties represented in the study included humanities, health sciences, science, and commerce.

¹⁰ Either in a research or teaching position (or both)

¹¹ Undertaking this research at UCT was a practical choice, as it allowed for more efficient use of both time and funds within the restricted scope of this study. However, while this research is situated at UCT, its primary focus extends beyond the specificities of UCT or the differences between its faculties. The study captures the broader experiences of women in academia, many of whom have worked at various institutions both within South Africa's borders and abroad.

In terms of racial demographics, two women identified as African, four as coloured, and ten as white. A notable aspect of this study is that, while it focused on understanding impostor phenomena among women at UCT, the researcher did not initially account for the experiences of foreign-born nationals. Four women had immigrated to South Africa, either permanently or temporarily, and had been educated abroad and also worked abroad before coming to UCT. This added a layer of complexity, as these international women brought with them distinct perspectives shaped by different educational and professional environments. Although the researcher was able to draw meaningful parallels between their experiences and those of the South African nationals in the study, she believed that a more intentional focus on their unique backgrounds could enrich future research.

The researcher had initially hoped to include a more diverse range of voices, particularly more representation from black women. However, the participant pool leaned heavily towards white women, a trend that, while not unexpected, does limit the scope of the research in terms of representing the broader spectrum of experiences. Interestingly, both African women who participated were under 35, which raises questions about why older African women did not come forward to share their experiences of the impostor phenomenon. It is important to highlight that because the majority of women in this study identified as white, the findings largely reflect the experiences of white, middle-class women in academia. Nevertheless, the research has effectively explored how personal and contextual factors shape the impostor phenomenon, how women cope with these feelings, and how sociological factors such as gender, race, and socio-economic background influence these experiences.

Table 1. Research Participant Summary

Name ¹²	Age	Race	Highest qualification	Position	Years in current position	Years at UCT	Employment at other universities
Tanya	50-59	Coloured	Masters	Lecturer	1 year	1 year	No
Lauren	40-49	White	PhD	Senior Lecturer	9 years	12 years	Yes
Precious	30-39	African	PhD	Lecturer	4 months	4 months	Yes
Kristin	50-59	White	PhD	Professor	8 years	13 years	Yes
Savannah	30-39	Coloured	PhD	Senior Lecturer	4 months	6 years	Yes
Jackie	40-49	Coloured	Masters	Lecturer	1 year	7 years	No
Courtney	40-49	White	PhD	Professor	1 year	14 years	Yes
Olive	30-39	African	PhD	Senior Lecturer	1 year	6 years	Yes
Saffron	50-59	White	PhD	Professor	7 years	13 years	Yes
Kimberly	50-59	White	PhD	Professor	11 years	13 years	Yes
Lilo	30-39	Coloured	Masters	Lecturer	4 years	4 years	Yes
Aurora	40-49	White	PhD	Professor	4 months	4 months	Yes
Hansel	50-59	White	Masters	Junior Researcher	9 years	15 years	No
Jasmine	60-69	White	PhD	Senior Lecturer	5 years	30 years	Yes
Summer	50-59	White	PhD	Lecturer	4 years	4 years	Yes
Jolene	30-39	White	PhD	Senior Research Officer	6 months	6 months	Yes

The researcher accessed the intended sample in Table 1 by utilising the internal UCT research list, which coordinates studies within the university involving staff members. Access to this list was facilitated through the university's Human Resources (HR) department after acquiring faculty ethical clearance¹³. Subsequently, an email invitation was sent to the staff members, inviting them to participate in the study. The study was intended to focus solely on women in the humanities faculty, but this targeted approach led to limited women willing to

¹² Pseudonyms have been assigned

¹³ See Appendix B

participate. This situation prompted the researcher to seek ethical clearance to expand the research to include women from all faculties within the university. Once this clearance was obtained, the HR department sent out the call to staff members who met the criteria. This, coupled with several personal referrals, allowed the researcher to secure the appropriate number of women to proceed with the research.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

Maintaining ethical standards is at the forefront of practising research. Ethics ensures that the expansion of knowledge on the subject matter does not come at the expense of the well-being of an individual or society. Before proceeding with the study, ethical clearance was sought and obtained from the Department of Sociology at UCT¹⁴ and the Humanities faculty¹⁵. After presenting the methodology of the research to the committee, approval was granted, as they were satisfied that the appropriate informed consent and confidentiality, anonymity, data protection, sensitivity, and counselling mechanisms (if necessary) were in place. Furthermore, the study ensured alignment with the practices of the UCT Humanities Faculty Handbook and Guide on Research Involving Human Subjects, which outline the ethical standards required for conducting research with human subjects.

Core ethical principles adhered to in the study included (a) informed consent, (b) confidentiality, (c) anonymity, (d) data protection, (e) right to withdraw, and (f) counselling mechanisms (if necessary). All women signed an informed consent sheet¹⁶ clearly stating all that is required of them and any other important information before participating in the study to ensure informed consent. The study also made use of pseudonyms to maintain the anonymity of the women throughout the course of the study. All documents pertaining to informed consent of the prospective research subjects were distributed via email. Due diligence was used to ensure that the information sheets outlined the rights and responsibilities of both the researcher and the participant.

3.5. Thematic Analysis Approach

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the interview data. Thematic analysis aims to identify connected topics that emerge from the data. Thematic analysis differs from other data

¹⁴ See Appendix C

¹⁵ See Appendix B

¹⁶ See Appendix D

analysis methods in its characteristic procedure of combining small segments of data to ensure that they are not overly fragmented while organising them to be cohesively analysed in detail (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To put this method into practice, the researcher used Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework¹⁷ for conducting thematic analysis, which is presented in Table 2.

¹⁷ See Table 2

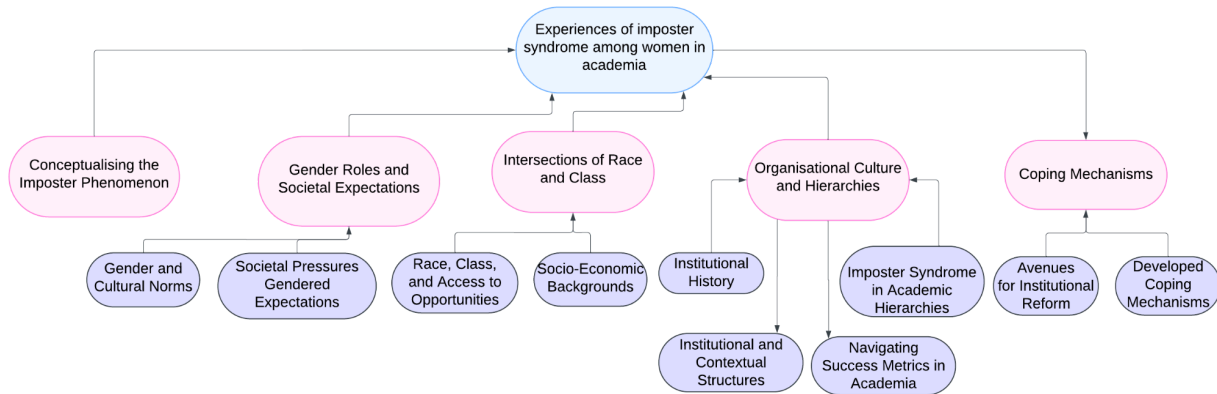
Table 2. Six-Step Framework for Conducting Thematic Analysis

Steps	Description
Step 1: Become familiar with the data	The work at this stage consisted of conducting the interviews, transcribing them from the recordings, and then reading and rereading the transcripts to familiarise myself with the data.
Step 2: Generating initial codes	In this phase, I started to organise my data in a meaningful and systematic way. This stage of coding reduced the large amounts of data into smaller, manageable groups.
Step 3: Search for themes	During this stage, I identified groups of codes that had similar meanings and assigned them to a theme.
Step 4: Review themes	I reviewed the initial codes and themes to identify any overlaps or repetitions. During this process, certain themes were adjusted and combined where necessary. By this stage, I was confident that data saturation had been reached.
Step 5: Define themes	In this step, I focused on refining the themes to capture the true meaning of what each theme represents, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). I asked myself: What is this theme really saying? Are there any subthemes? I also examined how the different themes related to one another.
Step 6: Write-up	I went on to write up my findings and aimed to give voice to the experiences of the women by illustrating their stories in a coherent manner.

When conducting thematic analysis, the researcher is required to identify a select group of themes that are relevant to the research question and highlight the importance of analysing them as opposed to maintaining the passive position of ‘discovering’ themes, which suggests that themes simply ‘emerge’ from a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). By accounting for the active role of the researcher in thematic analysis, the researcher can acknowledge their position and values in the study and account for them accordingly. Thematic analysis is an appropriate method of analysis for this study, as it is more than simply summarising the accounts of the research women. Rather, it serves to identify the specificities of the experiences of the research women and connect them to the findings of the qualitative data.

Thematic analysis serves as a versatile tool for interpretation, allowing the utilisation of both inductive and deductive research approaches, ensuring that identified themes can be examined from various angles (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Employing thematic analysis enabled the researcher to explore the dataset at a deeper, latent level. Theme construction is highlighted in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Theme Construction



3.6. Reflexivity and Positionality

Positionality and reflexivity can greatly impact the research process; therefore, it is important to acknowledge and discuss their influence (Yip, 2024). Positionality speaks to the influence of a researcher’s identity, race, gender, ethnicity, age, sexuality, socio-economic status, and other parts of their lived experiences on their research (Yip, 2024). By acknowledging the influence of the researcher’s identity in this section, she aimed to acknowledge any biases and assumptions that could come with it in order to ensure that the research remains ethical and transparent. In choosing to undertake this research, the researcher is reflexive of her position in relation to the academic context being investigated. She is a black woman making advances in the field of academia. As the primary investigator in this study, who has interacted with a variety of staff at UCT, she understands that being familiar with the environment in which the research is taking place gives her an advantageous understanding of the intricacies and challenges faced by women in academia. This status may present a risk of unintentional bias or preconceived notions. To address this, the researcher committed to approaching this study with a reflexive mindset, critically examining her assumptions, biases, and possible existing relationships with women. To conduct ethical and transparent research, she consciously separated her knowledge from the research process, ensuring that her prior

connections did not unduly influence participant selection, data interpretation, or the conclusions drawn. As a young black woman, there is a potential for confirmation bias to emerge during the research process. Given shared identities and experiences, there may be a natural inclination to interpret data in a way that aligns with the researcher's pre-existing beliefs about the challenges faced by women in academia. Acknowledging the potential for over-identification with women due to possibly shared emotions, there is a risk of a more empathetic stance that might compromise objectivity. To address this empathy bias, the researcher committed to striking a balance between empathy and objectivity, which ensured that interpretations remained grounded in the data. In conclusion, this research is a representation of the researcher's commitment to maintaining impartiality as a crucial component to ensuring the validity and reliability of the research findings.

3.7. Chapter Summary

This chapter discussed the research design and methodological procedures employed in the study to investigate the experience of IP among women academics. Underpinned by a qualitative phenomenology and feminist construct of voice, the next chapter presents the research findings utilising the narrative accounts of the women participants.

Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

4.1. Introduction

The preceding chapter discussed the research methodology employed in this study. This chapter presents an in-depth analysis of IP among women academics at UCT by giving voice to their experiences and documenting their narratives. Five key themes are discussed in response to the research question. These are (1) conceptualising experiences of impostor phenomenon; (2) gender, race, and societal expectations; (3) race, class, and privilege; (4) history, culture, and hierarchies; and (5) management strategies employed to navigate impostor phenomenon.

4.2. Conceptualising Experiences of Impostor Phenomenon

This theme explored how women in academic environments understand and interpret the experience of IP within the context of the South African higher education landscape. Impostor phenomenon is not solely an internal psychological struggle but is deeply embedded in the institutional and societal dynamics confronting individuals. This is particularly the case for women in a post-apartheid South African context (Riordan & Louw-Potgieter, 2011; Shober, 2014). This question, therefore, uncovers how women conceptualise impostorism not only as a personal experience but as a reflection of the institutional and cultural barriers that exist in academic environments (and broader South African society).

4.2.1. *Stereotypes, Professional Identity, and Belonging*

The women communicated their understandings of the impostor phenomenon in accordance with Clance's (1985) conceptualisation, highlighting feelings of self-doubt, inadequacy, fraudulence, and exclusion. As Jasmine¹⁸ shared:

I think I've always felt like a bit of an underdog. I've been surprised to hear that other people think I'm confident because I haven't felt that... So, impostor syndrome to me is you feel you don't fit in. You're not. You're not valuable enough.

¹⁸ Jasmine, Senior Lecturer, 22/05/2024

The women further highlighted how deeply ingrained societal stereotypes regarding the position they are expected to hold in academic spaces shaped their perceptions of themselves in academia. Reflecting on how stereotypes influence a sense of belonging, Lauren¹⁹ commented:

When I grew up, the picture that we had of a university professor was an old white male. Even though I'm now a lecturer at university, those are such ingrained stereotypes that I think subconsciously, I sometimes feel like I don't fit that picture.

In a similar line of thought, Savannah²⁰ illustrates her conceptualisation of an 'impostor' in academic contexts, as the perceptions of the ideal academic did not apply to her. Definitions of who 'belongs' in certain spaces can be attributed to how institutional cultures in academia are steeped in exclusionary practices. She describes how the university environment itself felt unwelcoming for women like her:

UCT was not built for women who look like me. It's not built for people who have my skin colour. When you think about a lecturer or doctor, you think of a white man with a white beard who has a deep, commanding voice. And I'm like 5'1 and, you know, coloured. Will people take me seriously?

Her observations underscore the broader challenges that women of colour face in academic spaces, which continue to reflect colonial and patriarchal values (Cope-Watson & Betts, 2010).

This internal conflict between the societal expectation of who and what a 'university professor' should be and her personal identity amplifies feelings of inadequacy, reinforcing the notion that she does not belong. Such feelings are indicative of the impostor phenomenon, where a disconnect between the individual's perceived professional identity and societal expectations creates self-doubt. Additionally, the pressure to conform to the idealised persona of an 'academic' exacerbates internal conflicts related to authenticity.

¹⁹ Lauren, Senior Lecturer, White, 22/04/2024

²⁰ Savannah, Senior Lecturer, Coloured, 19/03/2024

4.2.2. *Authenticity vs the Idealised Academic Persona*

The women expressed how the multifaceted nature of their identities, encompassing roles such as caregivers, family members, or community leaders, often conflicts with the singular, narrow narrative commonly celebrated in academia. A common notion is that the ‘ideal’ academic has been described as someone who possesses a singular devotion to their research, professional advancements, and visibility in high-impact publications. Such traits align with the meritocratic nature of academia and assume a lack of prioritising their personal obligations, reinforcing a culture where women with multifaceted identities struggle to navigate the academic space. This idealisation and vision of an academic, single-mindedly and wholly dedicated to the profession, conflicts with other personal responsibilities or aspects of their identity. The celebration of this often rigid expectation tends to create insecurities among the women who do not fit into this mould, as they try to balance between caregiving, community commitments, and other commitments alongside their academic careers, thus heightening feelings of IP (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Cope-Watson & Betts, 2010).

In this vein, Lauren²¹ expressed “...that picture of being utterly consumed by the subject matter²²... I think that’s what often makes me feel like I can never be a professor because I have other things in my life.” This sentiment is further echoed by Lilo, who explains:

I feel like in academia, there is no space to be something else but an academic. If I look at the people around me, they eat, sleep and drink academia, not me. I don’t know if it’s the new generation of people, but I want balance in my life.

The idealised academic leaves little room for the domestic responsibilities traditionally ascribed to women. It further reflects the tension women face when trying to balance their roles as caregivers with the expectations of academia. This forces them to navigate the two conflicting expectations and creates feelings of self-doubt and impostorism when they feel that they are not performing to the best of their abilities in either domain. Furthermore, the tension experienced by the women with their multifaceted identities as a mother, a wife, and an academic is aligned with the denial of competence, as they discount their worth and

²¹ Lauren, Senior Lecturer, White, 22/04/2024

²² This refers to the expectation that an academic should display a singular focus on their academic work and field of study in order to be successful.

struggle to reconcile their authentic self with the idealised version of an academic (Huecker et al., 2022).

Many women felt the need to construct a professional persona that aligns with societal and historically ingrained definitions of a stereotypical academic. The internalised pressure to conform to societal expectations reinforces the feeling of being a “fake”. Kimberly²³ captures this sentiment when she shares:

I’m a good actor, and I’ve got to where I am just because I can talk the talk. I mean, I can stand on the stage and sound like I’m really knowledgeable about things. But there’s always... I always go on to the stage thinking to myself, I don’t know enough or I don’t know everything, so therefore, it’s not enough.

Kimberly’s²⁴ experience of presenting a false self to navigate the academic world aligns with the impostor cycle and denial of competence characteristic of the impostor cycle, which is marked by over-preparation or procrastination in response to achievement-related tasks. Kimberly’s²⁵ self-portrayal of being knowledgeable, despite feeling inadequate, reflects this cycle, where over-preparation covers her feelings of insecurity. Additionally, her internal struggle demonstrates a denial of competence, as she attributes her success to her ability to ‘talk the talk’ rather than to her actual knowledge and skills.

This presentation of a ‘false self’ is consistent with the literature by Pákozdy et al. (2023), Pool (2022), and Ross and Krukowski (2003), who highlight that for many women, the pressure to conform to these idealised academic standards involves presenting themselves as competent and confident, despite internal feelings of doubt, which further entrenches the false presentation of the self. This highlights the tension between presenting expertise externally and feeling inadequate internally (Levy, 2022; Parkman, 2016). Presenting a facade becomes a survival strategy, allowing women to navigate spaces where their expertise may not always be acknowledged or valued. By communicating an idea of impostorism that was highlighted by feelings of self-doubt, inadequacy, and fear of being exposed as frauds, the women resonate strongly with descriptions of the impostor cycle, perfectionism, and super-heroism conceptualised by Clance and Imes (1978) and extended upon by Huecker et al. (2022). These efforts to encapsulate the ‘traditional academic’ often further their feelings of

²³ Kimberly, Full Professor, White, 23/05/2024

²⁴ Kimberly, Full Professor, White, 23/05/2024

²⁵ Kimberly, Full Professor, White, 23/05/2024

inadequacy. These feelings are further heightened by biases in academia that do not value the contributions of members who do not conform to this traditional, often white, male-dominant idea of an academic. These observations further align with studies on the impostor phenomenon conducted in ‘male gender-typed’ professions such as STEM fields, where women expressed that the problematic nature of their work environments had damaging effects on their sense of self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and desire to participate in the masculine organisational culture that surrounds them (Moss-Racusin et al., 2021; Robnett, 2016). Where women feel compelled to part of themselves in order to align with the professional culture which prioritises traditionally masculine traits, the women face exacerbated feelings of impostorism.

4.3. Gender, Race, and Societal Expectations

This theme illustrates how societal pressures placed on women influence their feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy in academic settings. It explores how traditional gender role expectations contribute to a sense of not being “enough” or being a “fraud” in their careers. It documents how such external pressures shape how women see themselves and their abilities in the academy.

4.3.1. *Seen as a Woman, Not an Academic*

The women revealed how gender stereotypes and biases shaped by traditional gender roles and cultural expectations exist within the academy. Stereotypes manifest in various ways, from subtle biases to overt discrimination, leaving many women feeling fraudulent in their professional roles, as they constantly measure their worth against the imposed standards of male success. Courtney²⁶ reflected on the hierarchical dynamics in her field, noting:

I think for most of my time, I looked quite young, and I believe that the intersection between my gender and perceived age has often led people to assume that I know less than I actually do or that my opinions and views should be given less weight than they deserve.

This alludes to how women are often viewed as less capable or valuable, reinforcing a sense of inferiority and making it challenging to claim space and respect in male-dominated environments. Additionally, the women noted how the constant questioning of their ideas and

²⁶ Courtney, Professor, White, 21/05/2024

legitimacy, coupled with being perceived as less authoritative due to patriarchal gender inequalities, fostered strong feelings of self-doubt (Jackson, 2018; Mount, 2015). This is exemplified by Olive's²⁷ encounter described below:

There was a line manager of mine who was the head of the section at the time, and this person was supposed to help me go through the orientation and tell me what I needed to do. However, he would call me into his office, and I would feel like, "OK, cool, we're here to discuss my job and my work." But instead, he would tell me personal things, hit on me, make very inappropriate comments, and then close the door to his office so that no one could see. I remember just thinking, "I don't know if I'm being taken seriously here as an academic or if this guy's just like, 'Oh, here's some hot, fresh young new blood, and I'm just gonna try my luck.'" He was a much older man, clearly taking advantage of his authority and power in the situation.

Olive's experience provides insight into the normalisation of objectifying and inappropriate advances towards women in professional settings, often due to ideas which disregard women as knowledgeable and professional colleagues and reduce them to their gender. This is a common practice in professions where male coworkers do not see women as equals due to the objectification of women in society and the subordinate role which they are expected to play in these spaces. In Jolene's²⁸ experience, male superiors even went as far as to attribute her success to their own perceived 'talents' as a way to reinforce existing unequal power dynamics:

I must say was when I was doing my PhD studies. I had an initial supervisor, and he was very I would actually, if I look back at it now, I would say abusive... He would say things like "You're not clever enough. You're just here because I'm great, I'm the best supervisor" and yeah, so that was the scenario for me that I really struggled with it.

For Aurora²⁹, the bias became apparent during seminars and presentations:

²⁷ Olive, Senior Lecturer, African, 23/05/2024

²⁸ Jolene, Senior Research Officer, White, 28/05/2024

²⁹ Aurora, Professor, White, 24/05/2024

During those seminars, I discovered that there was some unconscious bias against women. Whenever a woman would ask a question, it felt like she was more likely to not be taken seriously or attacked, which made women even more shy to ask questions or present, because they would always be scared of being attacked... In my field, economics, it's much more oriented toward men. Men tend to be much more assertive and self-confident than women. There is a kind of statistical bias. Men tend to approve and respect other men more than they would women.³⁰

The women described how the academic culture was disproportionately male-dominated, with men showing more confidence and self-assurance in professional interactions, qualities that are favoured within academia.

Several women described the difficulties they encountered while navigating male-dominated spaces, where they realised that subtle and overt biases consistently undermined their authority (Fox Tree & Vaid, 2022; Lewis, 2019; Thelin, Edwards & Moyon, 2021). Reflecting on her gendered experience at senate meetings, Kimberly³¹ stated that “there was a proposal... the meetings had to go on... until 8 at night... and people said, ‘but we have children to fetch from school’”. Although not explicitly stated, Kimberly insinuated that this comment was made by a male member of the staff. This demonstrates the disconnect between institutional structures and the lack of understanding and accommodation for familial responsibilities, largely undertaken by women (and in some cases, men too). The women also noted how the administrative load in academia was gendered. Drawing parallels between household responsibilities and professional duties in academia, women emphasised that women often bear the brunt of completing administrative tasks in their departments, which are undervalued yet crucial to the functioning of academic departments.

This gendered division of labour reflects broader societal expectations that women are more suited to supportive roles than leadership positions (Skelly & Johnson, 2011; Vogel et al., 2003). Echoing this, Lauren³² commented “...I’ve seen men underperform and like to drop balls, screw things up, forget to do them, and it feels like a strategy to not be given admin work.” Such observations point to a phenomenon known as ‘weaponised incompetence’, where men strategically avoid administrative responsibilities by failing to perform them, reinforcing gendered labour divisions in academia (Sincavage, 2023).

³⁰ Aurora, Professor, White, 24/05/2024

³¹ Kimberly, Full Professor, White, 23/05/2024

³² Lauren, Senior Lecturer, White, 22/04/2024

Similarly, Kristin³³ noted how she was asked to “dish out some coffee” during meetings with predominantly male colleagues. This further illustrates how deeply ingrained gender roles persist, despite women occupying leadership positions. The expectation that women should perform stereotypical ‘feminine’ tasks, such as serving others, reinforces outdated gender norms, effectively diminishing and undermining their authority.

...I wasn’t looked at as an academic who earned this place, I was looked at as a woman, a young woman, and that’s it.³⁴

This highlights how gender biases not only diminish professional accomplishments but also undermine their legitimacy as professionals (Yudkin et al., 2016).

Courtney³⁵ further speaks to the pervasiveness of patriarchal attitudes, even in fields that are supposedly more gender-equal (Cope-Watson & Betts, 2010). The consistent devaluation of women’s contributions, regardless of their qualifications and skills, entrenches feelings of impostorism.

...as a woman in academia, patriarchy is powerful... and even though I find myself in a profession where there’s majority women... I encounter men who just completely underestimate me habitually.³⁶

The pervasiveness of patriarchal attitudes, even in fields that are supposedly more gender-equal, is striking (Cope-Watson & Betts, 2010). The consistent devaluation of women’s contributions, regardless of their qualifications and skills, entrenches feelings of impostorism.

This inferiority, mostly perpetuated by male colleagues, illustrates how male assertiveness often overshadows women’s voices in professional spaces (Riordan & Louw-Potgieter, 2011). Similarly, Saffron³⁷ spoke about her experiences during her PhD, where the subtle and not-so-subtle criticisms she received from her male supervisor severely impacted her confidence: “He would be like, ‘...you’re not as good as you think, but at least you can follow instructions’”³⁸. Disguised as constructive feedback, such comments serve to

³³ Kristin, Professor, White, 05/03/2024

³⁴ Olive, Senior Lecturer, African, 23/05/2024

³⁵ Courtney, Professor, White, 21/05/2024

³⁶ Courtney, Professor, White, 21/05/2024

³⁷ Saffron, Full Professor, White, 28/05/2024

³⁸ Saffron, Full Professor, White, 28/05/2024

undermine intellectual self-worth and perpetuate feelings of inadequacy, internalised by many women navigating these hostile environments. Savannah's³⁹ experience further sheds light on the psychological toll these biases take on women in academia. Her journey was marked by a long struggle to assert her voice in the predominantly male space:

The people who sit in the Senate are all white men. Knowing this is coming in, you immediately feel like you have to prove yourself. It took me five years to put my hand up in a meeting and say something. Five years since I commenced working at UCT. Any other time, I would shiver, I would be anxious, I would have all these anxiety symptoms because I felt like I wasn't going to be good enough and people would judge me because of what I look like, because I'm a woman, because I'm coloured.⁴⁰

The intersectionality of gender and race compounded Savannah's⁴¹ struggles, illustrating how impostorism is exacerbated by institutional hierarchies (Bowleg, 2012; Davis, 2008). Such expressions reflect the power imbalances and silencing effect that many women experience as they struggle to assert their professional identity in male-dominated academic spaces. The internalisation of societal expectations about gender roles significantly affects the ability of women to assert themselves within academic spaces (Moss-Racusin et al., 2021; Robnett, 2016).

4.3.2. *Intersections of Race and Gender*⁴²

In South Africa, the legacy of apartheid and its contemporary effects have caused race to be deeply embedded into the fabric of almost all societal and institutional interactions, including academia (Gmerek, 2018; Sehoole, 2013). Historical exclusion of South Africans of colour from key economic and educational opportunities has created an academic system that, despite ongoing transformation efforts, remains deeply divided along racial lines. This affects both access to professional opportunities and the experiences of impostorism among individuals in these spaces. Women of colour experience a disproportionate amount of challenges navigating academia because they are more likely to have their professional identities questioned or undermined due to their race, compounded by the effects of

³⁹ Savannah, Senior Lecturer, Coloured, 19/03/2024

⁴⁰ Savannah, Senior Lecturer, Coloured, 19/03/2024

⁴¹ Savannah, Senior Lecturer, Coloured, 19/03/2024

⁴² This sub theme is further enhanced in section 4.3. Race, Class and Privilege

gender-based discrimination. As these oppressions of race, gender, and class intersect, they manifest through exclusion from professional networks, limited mentorship opportunities, and the expectation to adhere to norms rooted in Eurocentric academic traditions (Cope-Watson & Betts, 2010; Liu et al., 2021). In these circumstances, feelings of impostorism are heightened, as black women are often made to feel like they are “guests” in spaces that were historically designed to exclude them. This reality places additional burdens on women of colour pursuing academic careers, as they find themselves having to “prove” their competence, not only due to their gender but also their race, in a system that has historically privileged white middle-class and masculine norms.

For Olive:

It’s always this double consciousness. I know I’m qualified, I know I have the credentials, but then I walk into a room, and suddenly I’m second-guessing. Are they thinking that I’m here because of quotas? Am I really respected as a peer, or just tolerated? ⁴³

Olive’s experience speaks to the deeply ingrained racialised expectations in South Africa’s academic institutions. Her mention of “quotas” is important, as it reflects the racialised discourse around affirmative action and transformation policies aimed at redressing past injustices. However, even as these policies create spaces for black women, the suspicion that their inclusion is merely symbolic rather than based on merit heightens their feelings of impostorism (Boyd, 2012; Cohen & McConnell, 2019; Starnski & Son Hing, 2015). Lilo⁴⁴ further states:

When you enter into another social group, work group, whatever, you enter with that [race and gender], you’re not just entering as a woman, you’re entering as a woman of colour... people will see that...

This highlights the double levels of marginalisation faced by women of colour, where both race and gender shape how they are perceived and treated in professional spaces. In South Africa, the legacy of apartheid and its contemporary effects have caused race to be deeply embedded into the fabric of almost all societal and institutional interactions, including academia (Gmerek, 2018; Schoole, 2013). Historical exclusion of black people from key

⁴³ Olive, Senior Lecturer, African, 23/05/2024

⁴⁴ Lilo, Lecturer, Coloured, 21/05/2024

economic and educational opportunities has created an academic system that, despite ongoing transformation efforts, remains deeply divided along racial lines. This affects both access to professional opportunities and the experiences of impostorism among individuals in these spaces.

4.3.3. Navigating Familial Responsibilities and Professional Demands

The women highlighted how motherhood and caretaking responsibilities conflicted with their professional roles, which often facilitated feelings of inadequacy (Riordan & Louw-Potgieter, 2011; Shober, 2014). Women are often expected to excel in their professional roles but also to be exceptional mothers (Cope-Watson & Betts, 2010). The expectations placed on women to balance these competing roles exacerbate feelings of impostorism, as the pressure to succeed in both areas often leads to self-doubt and the belief that they are failing in one or more aspects of their lives.

Kimberly⁴⁵ highlights how mothering and caregiving responsibilities conflict with institutional demands. She described a situation where her child's health became a source of conflict with her superiors at the academic institution where she was employed during that time:

I had a baby, and she was really sick. I tried to take leave while she was sick and was told by the medical administrator that I was not able to take any more leave. So I put in my resignation papers and applied for a postdoc and luckily got the postdoc.

This incident underscores how a rigid institutional culture can undermine women's ability to fulfil their caregiving responsibilities without sacrificing their careers, even in circumstances where the formal policy entitles them the space to private responsibilities (Sallee, 2013). Kimberly's⁴⁶ decision to resign rather than compromise her child's health illustrates the tough choices many working women must make, balancing family life and career advancement (Ceci & Williams, 2011; Meyer, 2021). The inability to fulfil both expectations can significantly contribute to feelings of inadequacy. Similarly, Precious'⁴⁷ experience with maternity leave reflects how motherhood can contribute to the impostor phenomenon by

⁴⁵ Kimberly, Full Professor, White, 23/05/2024

⁴⁶ Kimberly, Full Professor, White, 23/05/2024

⁴⁷ Precious, Lecturer, African, 19/03/2024

creating disparities in career progression (Ceci & Williams, 2011; Naicker, 2013). She⁴⁸ explained how maternity leave set her back in comparison to her male colleagues:

There was a time when I was pregnant, and obviously, I had to take maternity leave. That means for up to five months, I'm not working, right? Whereas my male counterparts are... So, when I'm coming back from maternity leave now, it's like, oh my goodness, I've been set back five months already; my peers are way ahead of me.

Precious⁴⁹ reflection points to the direct influence of maternity leave on career advancement and how this leads to feelings of inadequacy, as it sets women behind in comparison to their male peers. The idea that women should remain as competitive as their male counterparts while also managing family responsibilities intensifies feelings of being inadequate.

When balancing work and motherhood, many women highlighted the internalised guilt and pressure they face when comparing their abilities to their male counterparts. The self-imposed pressure to perform at the same level as colleagues without similar caregiving responsibilities intensifies feelings of inadequacy. Commenting on the interplay between motherhood and professional responsibilities, Lauren⁵⁰ commented:

I have a six-year-old, and I live quite far from campus, so I'm constantly battling my kids' schedule and the traffic. Now I tell myself, no, I'm just making excuses. I have other colleagues, like a single mom who hikes a lot, and she's still one of the most published people I know.

These women (like many other professional women) are caught in the tension between professional expectations and societal demands placed on them in their personal lives, with these intersecting pressures amplifying feelings of fraudulence and self-doubt (Skelly & Johnson, 2011; Vogel et al., 2003).

The societal pressure to balance multiple roles, such as being a caregiver, a professional, and a community member, often results in women feeling as though they are unable to meet the standards expected of them in their careers. The internalisation of these societal expectations, coupled with gendered biases in academic environments, exacerbates feelings of inadequacy

⁴⁸ Precious, Lecturer, African, 19/03/2024

⁴⁹ Precious, Lecturer, African, 19/03/2024

⁵⁰ Lauren, Senior Lecturer, White, 22/04/2024

and self-doubt. Existing research on the conflict between work-life balance and motherhood, such as the findings of Sallee (2013), highlights how rigid institutional policies often fail to accommodate the caregiving responsibilities of women, forcing them to make difficult choices that hinder their career progression in academia. Similarly, the findings of Cope-Watson and Betts (2010) revealed that societal expectations for women to excel in both their roles as professionals and their domestic responsibilities create standards that exacerbate feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy. Findings such as the above showcase that the impostor phenomenon is not solely a product of individual psychology but is deeply influenced by broader societal frameworks (Cohen & McConnell, 2019; Merolla et al., 2012).

4.4. Race, Class, and Privilege

This theme extends to the subtheme of Section 4.3.2. on intersections of race and gender by focusing on how the compounding effects of gender, race, and class intersect with institutional structures to create feelings of self-doubt, inadequacy, and fraudulence (Clance, 1985).

4.4.1. Privilege in South African Society

Race and class remain deeply ingrained aspects of South African society and its tertiary institutions, with imbalanced power structures being persistent despite the country's strides towards equity through transformative policies at many levels. According to Savannah⁵¹:

Race is still such a deeply, deeply embedded thing... we tried to perpetuate this idea of, you know, we're all equal. But equality is a myth... the people who had power then still have power now.

Many black women navigate the academic workspace, experiencing racial discrimination, microaggressions, and exclusion, creating feelings of not belonging or being less capable (Gmerek, 2018; Sehoole, 2013).

The women noted how privileged socio-economic backgrounds and access to opportunities shaped their academic and professional trajectories. These backgrounds are not always perceived as guaranteeing success but certainly provide a framework within which individuals navigate academic spaces. The sense of privilege is sometimes subtle,

⁵¹ Savannah, Senior Lecturer, Coloured, 19/03/2024

manifesting in access to resources, familial support, or the quality of schooling, which contrasts starkly with those from less privileged backgrounds (Clance & Imes, 1978; Parkman, 2016). Kimberly⁵² reflects on her experience growing up as a white individual during apartheid, noting that her schooling was advantaged compared to others in South Africa. She acknowledges the privileges that came with living under a system that provided her with quality education and access to opportunities:

I guess as a white individual in South Africa, I was advantaged in my schooling, for example...we only had democracy when I was in university. So, things were quite different when I was growing up.⁵³

This afforded her the ability to transition seamlessly into university life and culture. However, she does not attribute her career success solely to these privileges, stating that much of her journey was “self-directed”. This reflection highlights the dual experience of her recognising her privilege while emphasising individual agency.

Olive’s⁵⁴ narrative brings another layer to this discussion, as she reflects on the role that cultural capital, particularly in the form of English eloquence, plays in securing funding and opportunities in academia. She attended schooling at a prestigious private institution, which afforded her linguistic capital and helped her gain access to academic spaces where others with the same racial background (black) may struggle to access due to their lack of linguistic fluency (Cohen & McConnell, 2019; Merolla et al., 2012). She notes, “I had to go and adopt [English eloquence] ...it wasn’t exactly who I was”. This highlights the subtle yet powerful ways in which race and class intersect, not only through material resources but also through cultural norms and the use of language in particular spaces that exclude those who do not conform to specific expectations. Olive’s experiences showcase the effects of linguistic capital as a mechanism of inclusion or exclusion. In the South African context, despite having 12 official languages, English is viewed as a highly valued form of cultural capital and is legitimised by its dominant use in education, employment, and sectors of the economy (Lan, 2011; Meyer, 2021). The dominance of English manifests as a social order where an accent with closer proximity to that associated with the white middle class and English fluency is considered the norm, and those who do not fit into these expectations are often marginalised (Thompson et al., 1991; Meyer, 2021). Olive’s experience of becoming more eloquent in

⁵² Kimberly, Full Professor, White, 23/05/2024

⁵³ Kimberly, Full Professor, White, 23/05/2024

⁵⁴ Olive, Senior Lecturer, African, 23/05/2024

English in order to gain access to certain academic spaces aligns with similar patterns in South African society, where the use of English serves as a means of communication as well as a mechanism for power.

In contrast, the women from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds highlighted cultural barriers and a lack of preparation for the academic profession as challenges that are experienced. For black women from working-class backgrounds, these barriers are compounded by a disconnect from the predominantly white, elite institutions they enter (Eagly, Wood & Diekman, 2000; Feenstra et al., 2020). The sense of not belonging becomes particularly evident when these women confront the elitist nature of the institution, as described by Savannah⁵⁵:

There are students whose parents have helicopters... I'm teaching students of millionaires and billionaires... What if one day I say something so silly, and they go back and tell their billionaire parents?

Savannah's⁵⁶ experience illustrates the pressure to perform at extraordinary levels while navigating the complexities of race and class-based expectations, especially when surrounded by wealthier, privileged students. Additionally, there is a feeling of self-doubt that develops from occupying space at institutions that were historically not meant for people like her. This fear of judgment is intensified despite her position of authority as a lecturer and PhD holder, showing the pervasive nature of the impostor phenomenon.

Lilo⁵⁷ echoes similar feelings of exhaustion, constantly fighting for her place in academia. She shared: "I resigned a couple of times in my head. I'm done. But it comes back to the thing of, well, I have a seat at the table. Why should I fight for a seat?". For Lilo⁵⁸, the challenge is not only about proving competence but also justifying her presence in academic spaces. Her experience highlights the enduring impact of South Africa's history, which historically prioritised white, male, and heterosexual norms of professional success, a legacy that continues to persist despite policies aimed at redressing gender and racial inequalities (Carbado et al., 2013; Luiz & Terziev, 2024). This ongoing struggle for validation, despite her

⁵⁵ Savannah, Senior Lecturer, Coloured, 19/03/2024

⁵⁶ Savannah, Senior Lecturer, Coloured, 19/03/2024

⁵⁷ Lilo, Lecturer, Coloured, 21/05/2024

⁵⁸ Lilo, Lecturer, Coloured, 21/05/2024

qualifications, demonstrates the emotional toll of navigating academia from a marginalised background.

For many women, entering university as students and later professionals is a profound cultural shock, where they expose a stark gap in preparedness, leaving them feeling disoriented and overwhelmed. Lilo⁵⁹ shares her experience of this cultural shock: “University was a shock because it’s so different... Coming to university, it was a different ball game... you’re left on your own...”

The experience of feeling unprepared for the rigours of academia is a recurring theme among women from disadvantaged backgrounds (O’Meara et al., 2018; Tabassum & Nayak, 2021). The lack of guidance and support, coupled with the absence of role models, contributed to a sense of isolation and inadequacy. Courtney⁶⁰, a first-generation university student, reflects on the absence of academic traditions in her family and the influence it had on her by stating, “there was no tradition of thinking critically about the world and discussing that at the dinner table... I never thought it possible [to pursue an academic career].”

Savannah⁶¹ comes from a working-class background and is a first-generation academic who used her education as a form of upward mobility. Alluding to her lack of prior exposure, she notes, “I come from a working-class community... there was nothing special... It was just me motivating myself”. Relying on bursaries to fund her education, she reflects on the isolation she felt due to the lack of financial and emotional support from her family. Her narrative underscores the conflict between pride in her self-sufficiency and the alienation she felt in academic spaces. Her “escape” from her working-class roots places her in a liminal space, unable to fully belong to either the world she came from or the academic space she occupies. This disconnect, coupled with the absence of familial or community support afforded to her more privileged counterparts, exacerbates her feelings of illegitimacy. Despite her academic success, she feels a profound sense of not measuring up to the expectations of the academic world, where her background seems to disqualify her from truly belonging.

This experience of Savannah is reflective of broader trends in the South African higher education system. According to Aliamutu and Gurr (2024), the increasing massification of education and the growing reliance on higher education for upward social mobility in an

⁵⁹ Lilo, Lecturer, Coloured, 21/05/2024

⁶⁰ Courtney, Professor, White, 21/05/2024

⁶¹ Savannah, Senior Lecturer, Coloured, 19/03/2024

unequal, racialised, and classed society can create structural challenges for historically disadvantaged individuals. Examining how race and class intersect to influence experiences of the impostor phenomenon reveals the significant effects of these social constructs on the lived experiences of women in academia (Naicker, 2013; Zulu, 2021). This intersectionality highlights how societal and institutional structures shape individuals' perceptions of self-worth, access to opportunities, and belonging in academic spaces.

4.5. History, Culture, and Hierarchies

Establishing an understanding of how institutional history, culture, and hierarchies influence perceptions and experiences of the impostor phenomenon is a crucial aspect in uncovering the role that institutional structures, norms, and power dynamics play in shaping feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt among women in academia. This focus moves beyond individual psychological explanations of the impostor phenomenon and interrogates how organisational cultures, often steeped in elitism, patriarchy, and racial inequality, create environments where women feel like outsiders, regardless of their achievements. The purpose of this question is to highlight the systemic nature of the impostor phenomenon within academia, challenging the notion that it is an entirely internal phenomenon.

4.5.1. Organisational History

One of the striking aspects of the impostor phenomenon is how it is exacerbated by the history and culture of the institutions in which academics find themselves. Organisational culture and hierarchies often establish norms and practices that can alienate newcomers, amplifying feelings of inadequacy and exclusion. For those new to an organisation, the feeling of being an outsider can intensify existing insecurities. This lack of familiarity with institutional norms and practices often heightens the challenges of navigating complex organisational systems and hierarchies. Lilo⁶² recalls her early days as a permanent staff member at UCT after previously completing her studies at a different university:

So, when I think back to a meeting like 2020-2021... I was about two months at the university, remembering I'm not from UCT, so I don't know the systems. I know nothing. I don't know buildings, I know nothing.⁶³

⁶² Lilo, Lecturer, Coloured, 21/05/2024

⁶³ Lilo, Lecturer, Coloured, 21/05/2024

This anecdote demonstrates how the lack of familiarity with the institution and its culture can create an immediate barrier to integration, leading to feelings of isolation and uncertainty. For many academics, particularly those from historically disadvantaged backgrounds or those who received their training at historically black universities (HBU), this sense of alienation is compounded by the elitist reputations some institutions, such as UCT hold. Adding to this, the historical context of UCT as a historically white university (HWU) and Lilo's⁶⁴ educational background at an HBU introduces an additional layer of complexity to her feelings of being an outsider.

UCT's unique historical context adds further nuance to how organisational culture influences the impostor phenomenon. The institution's roots date back to 1829 as the South African College, a private high school for boys, with women only being admitted in 1886 and the first black woman graduating in 1932. While the university has made strides in addressing the inequalities of its colonial and apartheid past, including efforts to promote black academics into senior roles (Morrell et al., 2020; Sadiq et al., 2019), the institutional prestige and cultural norms associated with it being an HWU can subtly imply a hierarchy. This leaves academics from HBUs feeling inferior or less prepared, exacerbating feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. Tanya's⁶⁵ reflection on UCT's standing compared to her previous institution highlights this as she shares: "We didn't want to be seen as weak. We're young people of colour. I'm from UWC⁶⁶, which is already frowned upon... UCT is elite in itself."

More seasoned academics provide a broader perspective, reflecting on how UCT's organisational history fosters an intimidating environment. Jasmine⁶⁷, who has spent over 30 years in academia, provides a nuanced reflection on the male-dominated and racially exclusive environments of the past, underscoring the intimidating atmosphere that is often fostered by the institution's historical symbols. She shared: "I remember going into Smuts Hall⁶⁸... and I remember being totally intimidated by all these pictures of old white men... This was before Rhodes Must Fall⁶⁹."

⁶⁴ Lilo, Lecturer, Coloured, 21/05/2024

⁶⁵ Tanya, Lecturer, Coloured, 12/03/2024

⁶⁶ University of the Western Cape (UWC) is a historically black university in Western Cape, South Africa.

⁶⁷ Jasmine, Senior Lecturer, 22/05/2024

⁶⁸ Smuts Hall is an elite male residence at UCT.

⁶⁹ Rhodes Must Fall was a protest movement originally directed against the removal of a statue at UCT that commemorates Cecil Rhodes. The campaign grew to a wider movement centring around the decolonisation of education in South Africa.

These reflections underscore the persistent influence of institutional culture and hierarchies on academics' perceptions and experiences (Fox Tree & Vaid, 2022; Lewis, 2019; Thelin, Edwards & Moyen, 2021). For newcomers, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds, navigating such an environment can intensify feelings of the impostor phenomenon.

4.5.2. Academic Institutional Hierarchies

For newer academics, entering an environment steeped in longstanding hierarchies and populated by highly experienced colleagues can be both overwhelming and intimidating. Savannah⁷⁰, reflecting on her early days as a young academic, captures this sense of unease:

Coming here and being 26 and being colleagues with people who have been in this business for years... I didn't think that people would take me seriously, so I tried really hard to look serious. I felt like I had to take on this academic identity that wasn't even who I felt that I was on the inside.

This pressure to conform to the expectations of academic norms and professional hierarchies often leaves new academics feeling as though they are impostors. These norms, shaped by historical and cultural legacies, have long upheld ideals of success aligned with white, male, and heterosexual standards within South African academia. This creates an implicit hierarchy where younger or less experienced academics may feel inferior, as articulated by Lilo⁷¹:

We would often be quiet in meetings because we often felt like we knew less than the others... One person's been there since 1994. I mean, I was four years old, so I mean, goodness gracious me. You could be like my grandfather, maybe or something like that?

Such reflections underscore how institutional hierarchies and entrenched academic cultures magnify feelings of inadequacy among newer staff members. The interplay between seniority, cultural expectations, and the institutional emphasis on tradition exacerbates the impostor phenomenon, particularly for those still carving their professional identity within academia.

⁷⁰ Savannah, Senior Lecturer, Coloured, 19/03/2024

⁷¹ Lilo, Lecturer, Coloured, 21/05/2024

Summer⁷² reflects on her previous experience with UCT's New Academic Practitioners (NAP) programme and its efficiency as one of the university's aids to incoming academics. She shared, "They have the NAP programme... but a lot of the times people go into these programmes and still don't feel like they can ask the silly questions. Creating a culture where there is no silly question and people can't really express themselves." Summer's⁷³ insight demonstrates how, even with well-intentioned programmes, institutional culture must evolve to support open, non-judgmental communication.

Lauren⁷⁴ further points out that institutional barriers remain, particularly in promotion systems, where the impostor phenomenon can prevent women from applying: "If you have impostor phenomenon, you're not going to apply for promotion. And the system is set up so that nobody's going to invite you to become an associate professor. You have to apply for it, and that's a huge barrier." For women grappling with the impostor phenomenon, the challenge of asserting their qualifications in the promotion process can feel daunting, reinforcing their internal feelings of fraudulence (Cope-Watson & Betts, 2010; Naicker, 2013). Ultimately, whether through creating inclusive cultures, revising promotion criteria, or tackling unconscious bias, academic institutions hold significant power in shaping the experiences of women in academia.

On the other hand, while it may be assumed that seniority would alleviate the impostor phenomenon, seasoned academics indicate that these feelings persist in more nuanced forms (Anggraeni, Wi & Herijawati, 2020; Jang et al., 2020). Courtney⁷⁵, recently promoted to full professor, shares how her elevated position has changed external perceptions of her role within the university:

To my huge surprise... now that I'm a full professor... Although that's only been a couple of months, it's already changed my position in the university. Suddenly, I've arrived. The same colleagues, same people I've worked with for years... suddenly they stop and say hi.⁷⁶

Courtney's expressions highlight the significance of academic hierarchies in shaping interpersonal dynamics and recognition. Still, despite external validation, internal self-doubt

⁷² Summer, Lecturer, White, 24/05/2024

⁷³ Summer, Lecturer, White, 24/05/2024

⁷⁴ Lauren, Senior Lecturer, White, 22/04/2024

⁷⁵ Courtney, Professor, White, 21/05/2024

⁷⁶ Courtney, Professor, White, 21/05/2024

often persists. Courtney⁷⁷ further notes, “seniority doesn’t mean that this thing just goes away, right?... There are many of my colleagues who are associate professors and professors who have an impostor phenomenon.”

This persistence of the impostor phenomenon among experienced academics reveals that it is not merely a function of inexperience. Instead, it is deeply tied to the cultural and organisational structures of academia, which perpetuate hierarchies and implicit expectations of competence and legitimacy. External accomplishments, such as promotions, may shift perceptions among peers but often fail to address the internalised pressures fostered by systemic and institutional norms (O’Meara et al., 2018; Sallee, 2013). This rhetoric is further supported by the effects of IP on academic staff as well as students across various academic levels. Looking at the experiences of women such as Sherlyn Gabriel and Reitumetse Kholumo, who have both recently graduated from their PhD programmes, Sherylyn revealed, “I suffered from a bad case of impostor phenomenon and even to this day, I catch myself feeling like I am not smart enough to get this degree” (Davids, 2022; Sunday, 2021). This is in line with the experiences of other graduates such as Reitumetse Kholomo and Tinéo Galela, who describe their early days at UCT as “daunting” and having struggles with their feelings of not belonging (Davids, 2021, 2022). These narratives showcase the prevalence of the impostor phenomenon at UCT across women at many levels of academia and are important for understanding how widespread the impostor phenomenon is at the institution.

4.5.3. *Barriers to Inclusion*

Practices of exclusion as well as those which reinforce hierarchical norms in academia play a significant role in shaping feelings of impostor phenomenon, particularly for women who navigate systems that were historically not designed for their inclusion (O’Meara et al., 2018; Sallee, 2013). The impacts of these institutional practices and contextual structures on the professional identities of the women academics are highlighted through the narratives shared in this section.

Kimberly’s⁷⁸ experience highlights how rigid institutional hierarchies are and how embedded doubt can undermine one’s sense of worth. Even after a promotion, she felt her value was questioned by institutional structures that perpetuated exclusionary practices. Kimberly⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Courtney, Professor, White, 21/05/2024

⁷⁸ Kimberly, Full Professor, White, 23/05/2024

⁷⁹ Kimberly, Full Professor, White, 23/05/2024

reveals how the institutional culture often fails to offer genuine recognition, suggesting that even formal acknowledgement within academic spaces can feel hollow or insincere:

When I applied for ad hominem for associate professor position... One of the very senior professors wrote in his report... that I didn't deserve a senior lecturer role, let alone an associate professorship. And I shouldn't have been applying in the first place. And then I was awarded it... but it was, you know, that feeling of, 'I shouldn't even bother because I'm not good enough.... People don't say, 'Wow, you're doing such a good job.' Every now and again, if you're applying for a promotion and you ask people to write you letters, then you get it. But it's almost like it's false. Very few people will come to you and say, 'Well done, that was a good job.'

These structural barriers, including rigid hierarchies and a lack of inclusivity, leave many women feeling that they must constantly prove their worth. Savannah⁸⁰ articulates this sentiment, emphasising how the institutional culture that emphasises self-reliance and constant achievement can intensify feelings of inadequacy, stating, "You constantly have to prove yourself with academia. You can't rest... You have to develop a thick skin... And even when you get to senior lecturer, what I did to be senior lecturer is not what's going to get me to associate professor." These reflections reveal how the organisational culture and hierarchical structures within academia often exacerbate feelings of impostor phenomenon, creating environments that marginalise and diminish the contributions of women, particularly women of colour (Clance et al., 1995; Cokley et al., 2013; Peteet, Montgomery & Weekes, 2015). This reflects how the organisational culture, particularly at the leadership level, significantly influences the experiences of women in academia by subtly undermining their confidence and reinforcing their feelings of inadequacy.

Equity in academia is also challenged by the competitive nature of scholarly work, particularly when it comes to peer review (Diezmann & Grieshaber, 2019; Liu et al., 2021). In this context, the hierarchical nature of academia can create an environment where more senior academics, who are more secure in their level of expertise, undermine less seasoned scholars through dismissive or unkind feedback (Guillaume & Apodaca, 2020⁸¹), captured how these dynamics contribute to her feelings of isolation and self-doubt:

⁸⁰ Savannah, Senior Lecturer, Coloured, 19/03/2024

⁸¹ Jolene, Senior Research Officer, White, 28/05/2024

Academics are very, they show off with their knowledge, and they all know a lot, and they feel free to tell it like it is. They are very unkind. So, you come in and it's like, oh yeah, this is going to be difficult. This is going to be tough; I don't think I can level up to that person. I don't have as many articles as they do.

This reflection showcases the systemic barriers that continue to manifest in academic environments, where knowledge becomes a tool for maintaining hierarchies rather than fostering inclusivity and collaboration (Anggraeni, Wi & Herijawati, 2020; Barlow & Antoniou, 2007). The inequities perpetuated through such structures speak to how institutional and contextual structures contribute to experiences of impostor phenomenon.

4.5.4. Navigating Success Metrics in Academia

One of the prevailing themes emerging from the interviews is the pressure placed on academics to meet specific institutional metrics for success. These metrics, deeply embedded in the professional culture, often prioritise research outputs, publications, and academic visibility, leaving little room for broader definitions of academic success or the holistic well-being of faculty members. This pressure, reinforced by institutional structures, was highlighted by women who described how the “publish or perish” culture shapes their experiences and reinforces feelings of inadequacy.

The women participants emphasised how academia's success metrics are often externally driven, requiring constant validation through publications and presentations. Kimberly expressed frustration with this system, stating:

The process that you go through to get rated is very much about proving one's worth. The whole time, you really have to prove yourself, and I think that's academia generally – you have to prove yourself. It's this publish-or-perish mentality.

This relentless need to demonstrate one's value through specific academic achievements leads to a narrow focus on research productivity, often at the expense of other important aspects of academic life, such as teaching and social engagement (O'Meara et al., 2018; Sarsons et al., 2021). Similarly, the notion that success in academia is tied to one's ability to perform visibility and self-promotion was echoed by Courtney⁸², who pointed out that

⁸² Courtney, Professor, White, 21/05/2024

institutional recognition often depends on public visibility, which can exacerbate feelings of impostor phenomenon. She expressed that “If your work never attracts the kind of visibility or is rewarded publicly in the way that others are, that silent voice in your brain says, ‘You’re not quite as good, or you’re not quite as worthy.’ And that can be quite demoralising.”

This system of recognition reinforces the idea that academic worth is tied to quantifiable outputs, which further marginalises those who may excel in areas less traditionally recognised, such as mentorship, teaching, or community engagement – soft skills often nurtured in women academics (Cohen & McConnell, 2019; Merolla et al., 2012). Lauren⁸³ reflected on the challenges of balancing multiple roles within academia, noting how the system is structured to prioritise certain types of academic labour over others:

To be promoted, you have to perform in three out of four categories: research, teaching, management functions, and social responsiveness. But research and teaching are the core functions that are compulsory, while the others are optional. This puts pressure on academics to prioritise research outputs, even when they may have significant responsibilities in management or social engagement.

In contrast to the rigid metrics currently in place, some women advocated for a more inclusive and flexible definition of success in academia, one that recognises contributions beyond research outputs. Summer⁸⁴ highlighted the tension between the increasing recognition of diverse academic work and the continued emphasis on traditional outputs for career advancement:

People value metrics without actually interrogating what those metrics mean and without looking at personal worth and value. We need to rethink promotion systems, value systems, and how we recognise achievements in different ways. The metrics used in academia are not one-size-fits-all, and there needs to be some flexibility. ...There’s a lot of talk about recognising other elements of academic work besides research, but at the same time, for getting promoted, it’s still very much based on the ‘publish or perish’ model. There’s recognition that publishing in a journal that no one reads isn’t the most important thing, but the system still rewards that.

⁸³ Lauren, Senior Lecturer, White, 22/04/2024

⁸⁴ Summer, Lecturer, White, 24/05/2024

These reflections underscore the need for academic institutions to broaden their definitions of success, moving beyond a singular focus on research to recognise the full spectrum of academic contributions, including teaching, mentorship, and social engagement (Deepphouse & Suchman, 2008; O’Meara et al., 2018). Without such changes, the current organisational culture risks perpetuating a system that values output over impact, ultimately exacerbating feelings of impostor phenomenon and burnout among academics.

4.6. Management Strategies Employed to Navigate Impostor Phenomenon

Thus far, the research has established that women academics at UCT experience feelings of IP influenced by a combination of societal and institutional structures. Given the existence of the phenomenon, it thus becomes necessary to explore how the women manage or navigate these feelings. While acknowledging the deeper structural issues confronting women academics, the management strategies also speak to their resilience. The research hopes to reveal the resilience developed by women in the face of these challenges while also acknowledging the deeper structural issues that continue to hold them back in their academic careers.

Throughout these interviews, women shared various personal reflections and advice on how women in academia cope with feelings of professional fraudulence or impostorism. Women emphasised self-awareness, self-compassion, and strategic actions, reflecting a broad spectrum of management strategies they employ as they navigate the impostor phenomenon.

4.6.1. Vocalising Challenges

One key management mechanism highlighted was the importance of breaking the silence around IP and advocating for oneself. Some women emphasised the necessity of expressing challenges and seeking support when needed. This underscores the importance of vocalising struggles as a strategy to bridge knowledge gaps and counteract feelings of inadequacy.

I think we should never, ever be silent. I think I was silent at a point and just said yes. Didn’t want to make it known that I did not know. I had difficulty in understanding. I didn’t know how to do something, and in actual fact, that is on us to say, ‘I don’t understand. I’ve not received the necessary training. How do I become proficient in this?’⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Lilo, Lecturer, Coloured, 21/05/2024

There's one or two colleagues here that I maybe run things by. So, I will say I'm not sure if I'm doing the right thing here or I'm doubting myself with this decision and I'll speak to some of the colleagues and you know they will kind of give me advice... And usually they will motivate me.⁸⁶

A recurring theme in impostorism literature is the silencing of discomfort, exacerbating professional fraudulence (Ogbogu, 2011; Parkman, 2016). Therefore, advocating for oneself by acknowledging the need for help and training is a vital management strategy.

4.6.2. Self-reflection and Recognition

The power of self-reflection and recognition of personal strengths was considered an important aspect of managing IP. Lauren⁸⁷ emphasised the value of focusing on accomplishments:

I would say focus on the areas where you are strong and keep reminding yourself of those areas. I would say you know you got this job for a reason. You didn't get the job by accident; you deserved it. So now that you're in that position, you should flex your muscles and grow.

The above aligns with the theory of self-efficacy, which suggests that acknowledging one's abilities can foster confidence and mitigate the paralysing effects of the impostor phenomenon. When women focus on their strengths, they can counteract feelings of fraudulence and gain comfort in the knowledge that their positions are deserved (Pákozdy et al., 2023).

4.6.3. Resisting Self-comparison and Perfectionism

Furthermore, women such as Hansel⁸⁸ and Summer⁸⁹ offered advice about resisting self-comparison and perfectionism, both of which fuel the impostor phenomenon. They encouraged shifting the focus from idealising others to appreciating individual journeys. Hansel⁹⁰ shares that to cope with impostorism, she would suggest, "don't measure yourself

⁸⁶ Jackie, Lecturer, Coloured, 12/03/2024

⁸⁷ Lauren, Senior Lecturer, White, 22/04/2024

⁸⁸ Hansel, Junior Researcher, White, 22/05/2024

⁸⁹ Summer, Lecturer, White, 24/05/2024

⁹⁰ Hansel, Junior Researcher, White, 22/05/2024

against other people. Try to believe in your own worth...just don't compare yourself to others. They're all on their own journey." Summer⁹¹ maintains a similar thought:

... be(ing) aware of your shortcomings... but also try to be aware of your strengths and what you do have to offer...It's better to do something rather than be paralysed by insecurity. We do learn through making mistakes, and I wish I'd known that earlier.

This strategy directly challenges the tendency of the impostor phenomenon to downplay one's achievements in comparison to others. This advice stresses that embracing mistakes as part of growth, focusing on the facts for what they are, and cultivating better self-compassion are all essential management mechanisms for combating the impostor phenomenon (Ogbogu, 2011; Palmer, 2021). ⁹² offered another management strategy by reflecting on the emotional and mental toll of overworking, a common by-product of the impostor phenomenon. She noted that while the impostor phenomenon can motivate high achievement, it can also hold individuals back from opportunities:

Impostor phenomenon is also a good motivating factor...feeling like I was never good enough, kind of pushed me to want to be enough. But it also holds you back from so many opportunities...So if I could tell myself something, it would be don't overthink it. No one actually knows what the hell they're doing. We're all just out here pretending.⁹³

This insight reveals the dual nature of the impostor phenomenon; while it can drive individuals to strive for perfection, it also limits their growth by stifling opportunities. Acknowledging the shared experience of the impostor phenomenon among peers can foster a sense of solidarity and understanding that many others are "pretending" can reduce stress and encourage self-compassion (Clance et al., 1995; Cokley et al., 2013; Stoeber, 2018).

4.6.4. Creating a Professional Facade

Some women described creating a professional facade as an initial way to avoid their feelings of IP in order to manage feelings of impostorism, particularly in environments where they feel their authentic identity may cause their credibility to be undermined or dismissed. This

⁹¹ Summer, Lecturer, White, 24/05/2024

⁹² Savannah, Senior Lecturer, Coloured, 19/03/2024

⁹³ Savannah, Senior Lecturer, Coloured, 19/03/2024

technique would involve dressing and acting in ways not completely authentic to them, not because they wanted to, but as a means to reduce their feelings of being an ‘outsider’ and assimilate to the visual and characteristic traits of those around them (Cohen & McConnell, 2019; Moss-Racusin et al., 2021; Murphy & Taylor, 2012). Savannah⁹⁴ describes her reasons for creating a new professional facade in the following ways:

I wanted to be taken more seriously. I wanted to seem more sophisticated. I wanted to seem more mature, so I did a little bob-cut. I would come to work wearing heels. I felt that I needed to present myself in a certain way so that students would feel that they can take knowledge from me, that I’m a kind of source of authority and a source of knowledge.

While this strategy may work as a short-term solution, for some women, the facade further reinforced feelings of displacement and inadequacy. Olive⁹⁵ expressed how the lack of representation in academia fuels the impostor phenomenon, highlighting that the absence of role models who share similar backgrounds leaves individuals feeling isolated and out of place.

While creating a professional facade can be a short-term management strategy, it often comes at an emotional cost. For example, Jasmine⁹⁶ shared the emotional toll that suppressing her authentic self, took on her: “It’s broken me having to do that (suppressing her authentic self). I’ve hated it, and it takes so much out of me. I’m sure you know, it’s hard for everyone, but it just goes against my personality.” Jasmine’s⁹⁷ experience highlights the fatigue that can result from constantly conforming to the professional expectations of academia that contradict her true identity. This illustrates how, although adopting a facade may help women cope with the impostor phenomenon in the short term, it can ultimately lead to burnout and deep dissatisfaction, emphasising the need for healthier, more sustainable management strategies.

The strategies for more concrete coping mechanisms range from self-advocacy and breaking the silence around feelings of inadequacy to self-reflection and recognition of personal strengths. The women emphasised the importance of vocalising struggles and seeking support to address knowledge gaps, which helps to counteract the internalised silence that often

⁹⁴ Savannah, Senior Lecturer, Coloured, 19/03/2024

⁹⁵ Olive, Senior Lecturer, African, 23/05/2024

⁹⁶ Jasmine, Senior Lecturer, 22/05/2024

⁹⁷ Jasmine, Senior Lecturer, 22/05/2024

exacerbates feelings of fraudulence. Similar coping mechanisms have been identified in research by Faizan Siddiqui and Azaroual (2024) on medical students and healthcare professionals who highlighted coping strategies such as seeking mentorship, engaging in conversations with peers about insecurities or stressors to normalise these experiences, and practising self-compassion. This literature also indicates the value of mentorship programmes in fostering a sense of belonging between individuals working through issues of impostorism (Faizan Siddiqui & Azaroual, 2024). Aside from mentorship programmes, practices such as creating an open dialogue about mental health issues and encouraging more collaborative environments have also been identified as effective strategies to reduce feelings of self-doubt (Faizan Siddiqui & Azaroual, 2024). Additionally, women in the study expressed encouragement to focus on their accomplishments, resist self-comparison, and embrace mistakes as opportunities for growth (Palmer, 2021).

4.7. Chapter Summary

The aim of this chapter was to give voice to the experiences of women academics who would otherwise have remained silenced. The analysis revealed that the impostor phenomenon is not merely an individual psychological issue but is deeply intertwined with societal and institutional structures of inequality, bias, racism, sexism, and patriarchy. Ultimately, the findings underscore the importance of a multifaceted approach to understanding IP. The chapter that follows will focus on the conclusion and recommendations of the study.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1. Introduction

This study sought to understand the experiences of IP among women academics in South Africa. It specifically sought to understand how they conceptualise IP and how societal, institutional, and historical systems influence its manifestation and effects on women academics, illustrating how IP is beyond an individualistic psychological phenomenon, but rather the sum of multiple intersecting social, cultural, political, and historical forces.

The penultimate chapter discussed the findings of the study. This final chapter will consider the study's key findings, implications, limitations, and recommendations.

5.2. Key Findings

The findings of this study reveal that women in South African academia conceptualise the impostor phenomenon as a complex, multifaceted phenomenon that extends beyond internal psychological struggles to encompass societal and institutional pressures. The study highlighted that women experience the impostor phenomenon as a conflict between their authentic selves and the idealised persona of an academic, which is shaped by deep-rooted societal stereotypes and professional expectations.

One of the prominent themes that emerged was the internalisation of societal stereotypes about academia, particularly the image of an academic as a white, male, and singularly focused figure. This stereotype significantly influences women's sense of belonging in the academic sphere. For example, the expression of how stereotypical images of the "old, white male" university professor clash with the identity of those that do not fit into that description, heightens this disconnect where women feel they do not fit the dominant academic mould, is a core aspect of how they conceptualise the impostor phenomenon.

The study also highlighted the pressure to conform to the idealised academic persona – characterised by perfectionism, exclusive dedication to research, and unquestioned expertise – as a key challenge for many women. This pressure contributed to their feelings of impostorism. This study has shown the transformative nature of South African society, its higher education profession, and the legislative policies that have been implemented to spearhead this transformation and create lasting change. However, the real-life experiences of

the women have showcased the lack of real-life change individuals are experiencing on the ground level.

Traditional gender norms, including the expectation that women balance professional, familial, and community roles, contribute significantly to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. The women in this study frequently described feeling that they were not meeting societal standards of success, particularly in male-dominated academic spaces. This led to internalised feelings of being a “fraud” or not being “enough”, which were further compounded by both overt and subtle biases they faced in these environments. The study also highlighted how these gendered pressures are institutionalised, as this gendered division of labour in academic environments, such as women disproportionately being assigned the responsibility of administrative duties, reinforces these outdated stereotypes and further minimises women’s contributions.

Intersectionality further acted as a valuable construct to understand the significant role that both race and class play in shaping the experiences of the impostor phenomenon among women in academia. Women from marginalised racial and socio-economic backgrounds, particularly women of colour, reported heightened feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt, which were exacerbated by racial discrimination, microaggressions, and exclusion. These experiences reflect broader societal and institutional structures in South Africa, where the legacy of apartheid continues to shape academic environments. The intersection of race, gender, and class not only influences how women are treated but also how they perceive their legitimacy in academic spaces, often leading to the internalisation of impostorism. Furthermore, the study revealed how socio-economic status intersects with race to affect access to opportunities and resources, which in turn influences academic trajectories. Women from disadvantaged backgrounds described challenges in transitioning to higher education, citing a lack of familial support, cultural capital, and preparedness for the rigours of academic life.

The findings of this study reveal that women working in academia utilise a range of personal and institutional coping mechanisms to navigate the impostor phenomenon, which is often amplified by structural inequalities related to gender, race, and class. On a personal level, self-advocacy emerged as a critical strategy, with many women emphasising the importance of breaking the silence around their feelings of inadequacy and seeking support when needed. Self-compassion, self-reflection, and focusing on individual strengths were also frequently

mentioned as effective ways to counteract feelings of fraudulence. Upon analysis, these management strategies reflect the resilience of women in academia but also underscore the emotional strain that the impostor phenomenon can have on their well-being.

Although the methods of management strategies communicated by the women are an excellent demonstration of how resilient women in academia are, they also raise an important question regarding whether or not these actions actually help women overcome their experiences of the impostor phenomenon or simply allow them to temporarily manage its effects. These individual management strategies may be empowering; however, it is important to note that, rather than fully resolving the underlying issues, these short-term solutions may help women navigate their structurally unequal environment. Nevertheless, these strategies are insufficient to drive institutional changes or address existing systemic barriers.

At the institutional level, women highlighted the importance of creating inclusive cultures and addressing unconscious bias as essential reforms needed to support women in navigating the impostor phenomenon. Initiatives such as mentorship programmes, safe spaces for discussion, and fostering environments where women's contributions are respected were identified as crucial for mitigating the effects of impostorism. However, while women often employ management strategies, such as creating professional facades to navigate these challenges, this approach can also lead to burnout and emotional exhaustion.

5.3. Implications of the Study

While previous research has predominantly relied on psychological theories, this study extends people's understanding by integrating feminist intersectionality, socio-cultural, and organisational cultural theories to provide a nuanced perspective on how social, historical, and institutional factors shape experiences of impostorism. The intersectionality framework is particularly valuable, as it showcases how different social identities intersect to influence the way women experience the impostor phenomenon.

The use of socio-cultural theory enriches this analysis, as it highlights the effects of social interactions and culture within academia on how women internalise feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. This perspective is also substantiated by the insights of organisational culture theory, which illustrate how the institutional values of academic settings perpetuate gendered expectations and exclusionary practices, further reinforcing negative feelings of legitimacy

and belonging among women in the field. This robust theoretical approach shifts the focus from individual psychology to a more holistic understanding of the structural and cultural forces at play, making a valuable contribution to the impostor phenomenon.

The study also adds to discourse in existing literature by focusing on a unique demographic – women academics in South Africa – whose experiences have been largely underexplored. The uniqueness of this demographic is an important implication to research, given South Africa’s complicated socio-historical context and its implications on contemporary social and institutional practices. By focusing on the lived experiences of these women, this study provides insight into how the intersection of institutional cultures, societal expectations, and structural barriers influences feelings of the impostor phenomenon.

The discussions in this study further highlight the important role of organisational culture and hierarchies in shaping perceptions and experiences of the impostor phenomenon, particularly within academia. The institutional structures, steeped in historical and cultural norms, perpetuate a sense of alienation, especially for women from marginalised backgrounds. Hierarchical systems, whether through overt exclusion or more subtle forms of elitism, create environments where individuals constantly feel the need to prove themselves, intensifying feelings of inadequacy. Through the experiences shared by women, it becomes evident that the impostor phenomenon is deeply rooted in the systemic and structural inequities within academic institutions.

Methodologically, this research provides value by employing a qualitative phenomenological design, which prioritises the lived experiences of individuals within their specific social and institutional contexts. Given the scarcity of qualitative research on the impostor phenomenon, this study enriches the field by capturing the richness and complexity of these experiences. By focusing on personal narratives, the research provides a more detailed and contextually grounded understanding of how women in academia navigate the impostor phenomenon. Giving voice to the narratives of these women has allowed them to articulate their experiences of IP in a way that humanises the research while highlighting the different lived experiences of women understanding and navigating the impostor phenomenon.

5.4. Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Building upon the findings and limitations of this study, several recommendations for future research can be proposed:

- Future studies should expand beyond a single institutional context to include a comparative analysis across multiple universities in South Africa. Exploring the experiences of women in various institutional settings, including historically disadvantaged universities and private institutions, can reveal how organisational cultures and histories shape the prevalence and manifestation of the impostor phenomenon.
- Because of the difficulties of gaining access to a database for this sample, future research may benefit from making use of more quantitative methods, such as surveys or questionnaires, in order to better appeal to those with availability restraints.
- Considering a broader geographic scope would also enhance the findings to include richer perspectives from women of colour and offer a more nuanced perspective on the dynamics of race, gender, and class, as the sample in this study consisted mostly of white women.
- Although this study provides meaningful insights within the specific context of UCT, an HWU will have its own implications for participants in this context. Future research could benefit from exploring how different institutional environments, such as an HBU, shape experiences of the impostor phenomenon.
- Future research could explore how specific interventions, such as mentorship programmes, leadership training, or organisational reforms, influence women's experiences of the impostor phenomenon, providing evidence-based strategies for mitigating its impact. Such research would not only contribute to academic knowledge but also inform actionable strategies to create more supportive and inclusive environments for women in academia.

5.5. Final Reflections

Conducting this research has been an enriching and personal journey. From my initial curiosity about the impostor phenomenon among women to the culmination of this study, my passion for the topic has grown immensely. Engaging with the women's stories, I was struck by the rawness and vulnerability they shared, recounting moments of self-doubt, isolation, and resilience. Their emotional openness not only brought the weight of their experiences to light but also underscored the persistent challenges women in academia face. These moments

were eye-opening not only for the data they provided but also for the insight they offered into all the emotional labour that accompanies academic work.

The conversations that I had with the women inevitably prompted me to reflect inward. I confronted my own experiences with microaggressions, self-doubt, and feelings of not belonging within academic spaces. At times, I recognised myself in the narratives of my women – moments of questioning whether I truly deserved to be where I am or if my accomplishments were legitimate. I also became aware of some of the harmful coping mechanisms I've employed, such as overworking to mask insecurities or downplaying achievements to avoid scrutiny. While this self-reflection was challenging, it also pushed me to consider more constructive ways to navigate these feelings.

There were instances during interviews where women broke down into tears or voiced feelings they had never expressed before, creating moments of connection and mutual understanding that transcended the typical researcher-participant dynamic. These encounters reminded me of the collective power of shared experiences and highlighted the urgent need to disrupt the isolation that perpetuates impostor phenomena in academic spaces. Ultimately, this research demonstrates the significance of resilience and the brilliance of women in academia who continue to inspire me with their ability to thrive despite systemic barriers and internal struggles.

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Appendix A: Interview Schedule

Introduction:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. This research intends to better understand your experiences of impostor syndrome as a woman working in academia. So there are no right or wrong answers to any of our questions, I am interested in your own experiences. Participation in this study is voluntary, and your decision to participate or not participate will not have any consequences. The interview should take between 30 minutes to one hour, depending on how much information you would like to share. With your permission, I would like to audio record the interview because I don't want to miss any of your comments. All responses will be kept confidential. This means any information included in the report does not identify you as the respondent. You may decline to answer any question or stop the interview at any time and for any reason. Are there any questions about what I have just explained?

Establishing Rapport and Impostor Syndrome Awareness:

- Before we begin, it would be nice if you could tell me a little bit about yourself.
- Can you share a bit about your academic background and your current role in academia?

- How did you initially become interested in pursuing a career in academia?

Impostor Syndrome Awareness:

- Please tell me about your understanding of the term impostor syndrome.

Personal Experiences:

- Can you describe any instances where you have felt undervalued or underestimated in your academic role, and how these experiences impacted your sense of belonging in the academic community?
- Could you share any specific challenges or self-doubts you have encountered in your professional journey?
- How do you typically cope with or manage feelings of inadequacy or fraudulence?

Contextual Factors

- In what ways do you believe institutional structures and policies have contributed to the development of impostor syndrome within the academic setting, and how do you think these issues could be addressed
- How do you believe the societal stereotypes related to gender, race, or socio-economic background influence your professional identity and career progression in academia?

Intersectionality:

- How do you perceive the intersectionality of your identity (e.g., being a woman, your race, socio-economic background) influencing your experiences with impostor syndrome?
- Do you believe that the intersectionality of identity has different implications for impostor syndrome in South Africa compared to other regions?

Support Systems:

- What kind of support systems, if any, have you found helpful in dealing with impostor syndrome?
- How do you think academic institutions can better support women experiencing impostor syndrome?

Professional Advancement:

- In what ways do you think impostor syndrome may impact professional advancement and career progression for women in academia?
- Have you ever hesitated to pursue certain opportunities or roles due to impostor syndrome?

Institutional Culture:

- How do you perceive the institutional culture within academia contributing to or mitigating impostor syndrome?
- Are there specific policies or practices that you believe could address impostor syndrome at the institutional level?

Advice and Reflection:

- If you could offer advice to other women experiencing impostor syndrome in academia, what would it be?
- Looking back, what strategies or insights would you share with your younger self about navigating impostor syndrome?

5. Conclusion:

- Is there anything else that you would like to comment on that I haven't already asked you about? Thank you very much for your time and the information you shared today.

Appendix B: Faculty Ethical Clearance



Humanities Postgraduate and Research Office
University of Cape Town

Humanities Faculty Ethics in Research Committee

Room 115, Level 1, Beattie Building Private Bag X3
Rondebosch 7701 Tel: +27 (0) 21 650 5194

E-mail: zandile.tennyson@uct.ac.za

22 January 2024

Ref. NO: HUMREC202401-01

Dear Bimpe Ojetimi

RE: Ethical Clearance for Research Project

I am pleased to inform you that ethical clearance has been granted by an Ethics Review Committee of the Faculty of Humanities for your Master's project entitled: ***Dismantling doubt: A study on impostor syndrome among female academics in South Africa.***

I wish you all the best with your study.

Yours sincerely,

Associate Professor Bodhisattva Kar
Acting Chair, Humanities Faculty Research Ethics Committee



Appendix C: Departmental Ethical Clearance

Department of Sociology

Room 4.35 • Fourth Floor
Leslie Social Sciences
Building Private Bag •
Rondebosch 7701
Telephone: +27 21 650
3501

Fax: +27 21 689 7576

Email: Soc-Sociology@uct.ac.za

5 December 2023

Confirmation of Research Ethics Approval: Bimpe Ojetimi [SOC2023/31]

This is to confirm Bimpe Ojetimi's research proposal, "Dismantling doubt: A study on impostor phenomenon among female academics in South Africa", has been reviewed by the Sociology Department at the University of Cape Town.

The Department is satisfied that the research carries no significant risk or harm to human subjects. We are further satisfied that appropriate informed consent and confidentiality, anonymity, data protection, sensitivity, counselling mechanisms (if necessary) are in place.

It is a condition for the acceptance of Ms Ojetimi's proposal that it complies consistently with strict ethical standards. This will entail proceeding only on the basis of the consistently informed consent of interviewees and will require regular monitoring of ethical issues which may emerge as the project develops.

Should you have any questions or concerns, please contact the ethics committee chairperson tamlynne.meyer@uct.ac.za

Kind regards,

Ass Prof Nomkhosi Xulu-Gama
o/b/o

Sociology Ethics Committee

Appendix D: Consent Form

Project Title: Dismantling Doubt: A Study on the Prevalence of Impostor phenomenon Among women Academics in South Africa

Invitation to participate and benefits: You are invited to participate in a research study which investigates the sociological factors contributing to feelings of impostor phenomenon among women employed in the field of academia at the University of Cape Town. I believe that your experience would be a valuable source of information, and hope that by participating you are able to obtain a nuanced understanding of impostor phenomenon in the field of academia by discussing your own experiences

Procedures: During this study, you will be asked to participate in a thirty-to-sixty-minute semi-structured interview where you will be asked questions such as “Please tell me about your understanding of the term impostor phenomenon “, followed by guiding questions such as “Can you describe any instances where you have felt undervalued or underestimated in your academic role?”, “Could you share any specific challenges or self-doubts you have encountered in your professional journey, and how did you manage or cope with these feelings of inadequacy or fraudulence?”, “In what ways do you believe institutional structures and policies contribute to the development of impostor phenomenon within the academic setting?” and “How do you believe the societal stereotypes related to gender, race, or socio-economic background influence your professional identity and career progression in academia?”.

Recording: With your permission, I would like to audio record the interview to ensure accurate and thorough documentation of the discussions. The audio recording will enable the research to capture nuances, expressions, and details that may enhance the integrity of the findings.

Risks: There are no potentially harmful risks related to your participation in this study.

Feedback: You will receive feedback about the results of this research via email.

Disclaimer/Withdrawal: Your participation is completely voluntary; you may refuse to participate, and you may withdraw at any time without having to state a reason and without any prejudice or penalty against you. Should you choose to withdraw, the researcher commits not to use any of the information you have provided without your signed consent.

Confidentiality: All information collected in this study will be kept private in that you will not be identified by name. Confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained as pseudonyms will be used.

What signing this form means: By signing this consent form, you agree to participate in this research study. The aim, procedures to be used, as well as the potential risks and benefits

of your participation have been explained verbally to you in detail, using this form. Refusal to participate in or withdraw from this study at any time will have no effect on you in any way. You are free to contact me, to ask questions or request further information, at any time during this research.

I agree to participate in this research (Please tick one box)	Yes	No	_____ (Initials)
I agree to be audio-recorded (Please tick one box)	Yes	No	_____ (Initials)

Name of Participant

Signature of Participant

Date

Name of Researcher

Signature of Researcher

Date

Appendix E: Participant Confidentiality and Support Information

Confidentiality Measures:

- Participant data, including names, will be substituted with pseudonyms for anonymity.
- Strict measures are in place to ensure the confidentiality of provided information.

Psychological Support:

- No foreseen harm, but assistance is available for women experiencing distress.
- Access to the university's internal support systems for staff health and wellness.

Support Resources:

- Independent Counselling and Advisory Services (ICAS):
 - Helpline: 080 111 3945
 - ICAS On-the-Go app for live chat sessions.
 - 24/7/365 Employee Wellness Programme assistance.
- South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG):
 - Free telephonic counselling: 0800 171 171.
 - SMS requests for callbacks: 31393.
 - Email contact: office@anxiety.org.za.
- Additional support through Kaelo's Kaelo Cares page.
- Academic staff with Discovery Health membership can access medical aid services.

Data Storage and Future Use:

- Women will be informed about where and how their data will be stored.

- The possibility of future use will be explained to the women.

Results and Feedback:

- Women will receive contact information for completed research use/publication.
- Access to study results and feedback will be provided via email.
- Your well-being and privacy are our top priority in this study.