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Imposter syndrome in academic libraries: Indigenous women edition

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Imposter Syndrome in Academic Libraries: Indigenous Women Edition

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Abstract

This paper is a part of the proceedings of the 2022 LACUNY Institute. In a panel presentation, the authors discuss personal instances and feelings of the imposter phenomenon (also known as imposter syndrome) as it relates to their Indigenous identities. Additionally, they describe how imposter syndrome may affect their ability to be successful in their careers, and the internal pressure they feel to present a more Indigenous identity (whatever that may entail) in their scholarship and their professional positions. The authors also share their experiences with external pressures to exhibit a more "stereotypical Indigenous" appearance for the sake of their role as Indigenous library staff members, peers, and appliers for academic opportunities and how these pressures relate in their interactions with other Indigenous people through their work. They address recent developments in academia regarding the hiring of Indigenous peoples and avoiding "pretendians" (people who falsely claim to have Indigenous ancestry). The goal of the authors is to encourage discourse in the vein of Truth and Reconciliation and to spread awareness about imposter syndrome.

Keywords

Imposter syndrome, academic libraries, Indigenous, Canada, librarianship, pretendians

Biographies

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Introduction

What is imposter syndrome? Imposter syndrome can be compared to an onion: There are layers to the phenomenon, and every person may have a different number that affects them. Characteristics such as age, race, level of education, and experience may impact this number and leave a person questioning: Am I good enough? Am I an imposter?

Background Information

Contextual information on the Canadian Indigenous identity is provided to assist with comprehension of this paper. At the end of the article are resources for further reading on the topics discussed.

Indigenous

Indigenous is often used to describe a person who is of First Nations, Métis, or Inuit (FNMI) cultural descent; however, legal documentation in Canada refers to the FNMI collective as Aboriginal peoples. While both terms are acceptable, Indigenous is more commonly used to describe the original inhabitants of the land we now call Canada (Parrott & Filice, 2020, para. 1). While severely disrupted by colonization, Indigenous communities continually strive to revitalize traditional knowledge, languages, and cultural practices; Across Canada, 634 First Nations communities are recognized, representing more than 50 Nations and 50 different Indigenous languages, excluding Métis and Inuit populations (Indigenous Services Canada, 2020, p. 11). It is important to recognize how distinct cultural differences define FNMI identities and the diversity among the nations. Also important are the Numbered Treaties: Eleven were made between the Crown and First Nations during the 1800s (Filice, 2016). As a consequence of Canada being a former territory of the British Empire (now a member of the Commonwealth of Nations), these 11 treaties were not made with the Canadian government but rather with the British Crown. The Numbered Treaties do not encompass all of Canada, nor do they include all First Nations. The treaties were arguably intended to assimilate Indigenous peoples into colonial society (Filice, 2016).

Métis

Born from the encounters between the Europeans (who had begun to settle what is now known as Canada) and the Indigenous Peoples whom they met, the Métis rose in prominence during the late 18th century. Defined by a distinct culture and mixed heritage, the Métis may be characterized as "a person who self-identifies as Métis, is distinct from other Aboriginal Peoples, is of historic Métis Nation ancestry and who is accepted by the Métis Nation" (Gaudry et al., 2019). The Métis are one of the three recognized Indigenous groups within Canada, in addition to First Nations and Inuit (Government of Canada, 2021, June 14). While the term "Métis" originally denoted persons of mixed French-speaking and Indigenous heritage, the term now includes peoples of both French-speaking and English-speaking backgrounds (Gaudry et al., 2019). The Métis homeland is commonly associated with "the three [Canadian] Prairie provinces [Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta] and parts of

Ontario, British Columbia, the Northwest Territories, and the northern United States" (Gaudry et al., 2019).

Pretendians

Pretendian is a portmanteau of "pretend" and "Indians." The word refers to those who wrongfully pretend, either intentionally or not, to have Indigenous heritage (Ridgen, 2021). The phenomenon is more common than most people know, and can often lead Indigenous people to feeling otherness or questioning their identity.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Residential Schools

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) has a mandate to inform all Canadians about what occurred within residential schools. The TRC documented the truth supplied by survivors, their families, communities, and anyone personally affected by the residential school experience (Government of Canada, 2021, June 11). Residential schools were institutions run by Christian churches to assimilate Indigenous youth into western society, with the support of the Canadian government (Miller et al., 2021). Overall, the TRC concluded with 94 calls to action, of which four relate to Museums and Archives (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Reconciliation is defined by the TRC as "establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in this country. In order for that to happen, there has to be awareness of the past, acknowledgement of the harm that has been inflicted, atonement for the causes, and action to change behaviour" (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, pp. 6-7).

Imposter Syndrome

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the imposter syndrome phenomenon as "the persistent inability to believe that one's success is deserved or has been legitimately achieved as a result of one's own effort or skills" (2018, para. 2). Much has been written on imposter syndrome, but only a few have focused on the phenomenon within the context of academic libraries, and even fewer articles focus on its impact on minority librarians. In their contribution to *Re-envisioning the MLS: Perspectives on the Future of Library and Information Science Education*, McClurg and Jones (2018) discuss the imposter phenomenon and the MLIS. They describe how they may "see if there is anything we can add to the modern MLIS program to mitigate imposter syndrome" (p. 7). Through sampling six programs in the U.S. and Canada, the authors discovered that the importance of onboarding, alumni relationships, and mentorship were no match for the lack of programming within the degree to assist with imposter syndrome (p. 22).

In their article, "Jumping into the Deep: Imposter Syndrome, Defining Success and the New Librarian," authors Lacey and Parlette-Stewart discuss their Ontario Library Association conference session where they confronted imposter syndrome through guided activities (2017, p. 5). In this session, the participants came up with a variety of solutions, including "mentorship, completing projects, setting goals, and developing relationships as markers for success" (p. 6). The authors emphasized the importance of creating a supportive network and acknowledged that most people have experienced feeling like an imposter (p. 6).

Martinez and Forrey examine the history of the syndrome in their article "Overcoming Imposter Syndrome: The Adventures of Two New Instruction Librarians" (2019). A survey with 172 participants revealed that 85% admitted that there was a time when they felt insecure, underqualified, or in danger of being discovered as a fraud (p. 336). The authors suggest that to combat imposter syndrome, finding a friend with whom to share their feelings could help (p. 338). In addition, professional development opportunities could increase overall understanding of the phenomenon (p. 339). Employers may assist in easing the effects of the syndrome by setting clear expectations and providing constructive feedback to employees (p. 339).

In the article "Do I Belong? Imposter Syndrome in Times of Crisis" (2022), author Anderson-Zorn assessed imposter syndrome within librarianship through the 2020 pandemic (p. 4). Specifically, they focused on subject librarians, and the multiple roles and duties liaison librarians were responsible for (p. 6). The author offered methods to combat imposter syndrome, such as sharing experiences through multimodal therapy so that everyone knows they are not alone (p. 7). Mentorship is also considered to be a coping mechanism (p.8).

Collier-Plummer's "Managing Imposter Syndrome" offers tips, such as giving up perfectionism and asking for help (2020, p. 25). The paper also indicates that "it's not always imposter syndrome," but can also be "the product of workplace culture" (para. 26).

When it comes to librarians of colour, Lee and Morfitt offer insight in their article "Imposter Syndrome, Women in Technical Services, and Minority Librarians: The Shared Experience of Two Librarians of Color" (2020). They were looking at the intersectionality of imposter syndrome, women in technology, and minority librarians (p. 141). The authors echo our own experiences with job opportunities and scholarships (p. 144). Their conclusion is that library schools cannot prepare students for everything, but having real-world library experience and mentorship can help new librarians get through obstacles (p. 145).

A Métis Librarian's Story

My name is Bethany and I am a member of the Manitoba Métis Nation. While I was born and raised in Manitoba and Treaty 1 territory, I currently reside in Coquitlam, BC, the traditional, ancestral and unceded territory of the kʷikʷəƛ̓əm, the Kwikwetlem First Nation, whom I thank as the Nation continues to live on the lands and care for them, along with the waters and all that is above and below (kʷikʷəƛ̓əm, n.d.). I work nearby at Capilano University, which is named after Chief Joe Capilano, an important leader of the Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) Nation of the Coast Salish Peoples. I respectfully acknowledge that the Capilano campuses are located on the territories of the Líl̓wat (Lil'wat), xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), shíshálh (Sechelt), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and səl̓ílwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations (Capilano, 2022). My role at Capilano University is the Indigenous Teaching, Learning & Initiatives Librarian, and this is the story of how I came into this position and how imposter syndrome has affected my academic career.

As a member of the Manitoba Métis, I inherently have a culturally rich and mixed background. My father is of Irish and Scottish-Métis descent, while my mother is of Ukrainian and Polish ancestry. I have always known of my Métis heritage and have been proud of it, but it was an afterthought throughout my childhood. At home and at school, I was more closely aligned with my Ukrainian background than my Métis heritage. I attended a Ukrainian-bilingual school, took Ukrainian dancing for years, and celebrated Ukrainian holidays. For many years, being Métis meant going to visit family for a weekend: riding horses, driving ATVs, and partying. Being Métis was a part of my identity, but a small one. When I informed people of my Métis heritage, I do not recall anyone questioning it. In Manitoba, being Métis was common and I never experienced any racism or microaggressions against me or in reference to my Indigenous background growing up. In hindsight, I recognize that this acceptance has given rise to the number of "pretendians" who can easily claim Métis status without any evidence or cultural or family relation to support such claims (Chakasim, 2022).

Ironically, the only notable instance of disparity that I experienced in relation to my Métis status was from the Manitoba Métis Federation (https://www.mmf.mb.ca/). When I was a teenager, my father had just completed the genealogical process to confirm our status as Métis in order to receive our Manitoba Métis identification cards. I had inquired if my children would be able to claim status one day and I was told that my children would not be able to claim status on the basis that they would not have the required percentage of Indigenous blood, known as blood quantum (Rice, n.d.). I was disturbed at this notion and even though this policy has changed in the years since, that interaction has remained with me and unknowingly fed my growing sense of imposter syndrome as I entered post-secondary education.

Initially as a university student, I studied Classics, the study of Ancient Greece and Rome. My heritage as a Métis person would become relevant only when I applied for scholarships and bursaries that were reserved for Indigenous students. Admittedly, I felt a sense of guilt at the back of my mind when applying for these financial awards, a few of which I received, for I felt as if I was taking advantage of a heritage that I had not fully embraced. I was Ukrainian and then Métis, not the other way around: That is how I felt. It was these guilty feelings that I would later identify as the imposter syndrome growing within my mind and gnawing at my self-esteem and decisiveness.

It was not until I changed academic paths and was accepted into the University of Western Ontario's Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) program in 2019 that I first heard of the term "imposter syndrome." This mental phenomenon was described as the feeling or sense of being mistakenly accepted or chosen and related to questioning self-worth; it was a common feeling amongst academics, especially graduate students. The moment I heard the definition, I knew instantly that it applied to myself and the mental barriers that I have struggled with for years. However, even as I accepted that I had imposter syndrome, the admission did not alleviate my feelings of anxiety and doubt.

It was during my MLIS studies that I discovered my passion for Indigenous librarianship and recognized my privileged position as a Métis person in academia. I knew that I could adapt Indigenous librarianship as my main niche and pursue a career as an Indigenous academic librarian. It was also during this time that I began to question my Métis identity, wanting to know more about my heritage. I coincidentally faced questions such as: "Am I the 'right' type of Métis?" or "Am I Indigenous enough to be an Indigenous librarian?" For nearly my entire life, I had treated my Métis heritage as a second thought, and now I was choosing to focus my academic career around it. I was struggling with feelings of being an imposter.

These feelings continued even after I completed my MLIS and accepted a one-year contract with the University of Calgary as their Indigenous Learning and Engagement Librarian. As part of my responsibilities in this role, I was the acting liaison for the International Indigenous Studies program and the Indigenous Student Access Program (ISAP). Even though I was an official Indigenous academic librarian, I still struggled with thoughts of inadequacy. How was I expected to be the perceived "expert" on Indigeneity when I was questioning my own Indigenous identity? I was learning to be an academic librarian on top of learning to be an Indigenous academic librarian (which are distinct). During my contract, I began to apply for permanent Indigenous academic librarian positions and often considered wearing Indigenous earrings or my Métis sash to better "look the part." Such thinking was due to my imposter syndrome in that I felt "too white" in appearance. I knew that this idea was foolish, but the thoughts were there, and the consensus of how to deal with thoughts of imposter syndrome is to not deal with them, that a person "gets used to it." I wholeheartedly disagree with this approach and believe that with increased discussion and awareness, more people will address imposter syndrome because it affects beyond the individual.

I am now in a permanent academic librarian position as the Indigenous Teaching, Learning & Initiatives Librarian at Capilano University, yet I continue to struggle with thoughts and feelings of doubt. I continue to deal with the questions that plague the back of my mind: Am I good enough? Am I an imposter? And that is my story.

An Ojibwe Student's Story

My name is Emilee from Batchewana First Nation of Ojibways. I began working on this project as a guest on Treaty 7 territory, home of the Blackfoot Confederacy (comprising the Siksika, Piikani, and Kainai First Nations), as well as the Tsuut'ina First Nation, the Stoney Nakoda (including the Chiniki, Bearspaw, and Wesley First Nations), and Métis Nation of Alberta, Region 3 (University of Calgary, 2022). In Calgary, I was an undergraduate student and served as the Indigenous Librarian Assistant at the University of Calgary. Currently, I reside on the unceded lands of the Kanien'kehá:ka/Mohawk Nation, attending McGill University as a graduate student and member of the second cohort of McCall MacBain Scholars (Montréal en Action, 2020).

Growing up, my Indigeneity was never kept a secret; however, it certainly was not celebrated. My family and I lived across the country from our reserve; thus the extent of our cultural practices rested in the batches of burnt bannock (bread) that my mom and I would attempt only a few times a year. The physical distance certainly impacted the extent of our traditional knowledge and experiences. Yet, upon reflection, I attribute much of our cultural disconnect to the many barriers preventing access to authentic cultural supports, education, and resources, which fostered a sense of cultural insecurity.

I remember sitting in history classes, learning about the assimilation of "savage Indians," identified by their tan skin, braided black hair, and regalia. I certainly do not look like the textbook portrayal of an Indigenous person, and at the time did not understand how my Indigeneity meant more than my lower levels of melanin. My classmates did not understand either. Once I shared my Ojibwe heritage, I was immediately accused of lying due to my blonde hair and blue eyes or was wrongfully labelled as Métis to justify my lighter complexion. The persisting comments weighed heavily on the insecurities surrounding my cultural identity; for a very long time, I felt my Indigeneity was helplessly associated with such negative connotations. I say helplessly because I had no reason or desire to reconnect during that time, but I have since met several Indigenous-identifying mentors who have challenged what I thought I knew about my Indigeneity and encouraged my cultural-reconnection journey. It has been a long process of learning and unlearning to truly understand what it means for me to be an Indigenous woman, but I have found a place and have never felt more like myself.

Ironically, my most authentic self somehow also feels the most fraudulent. With a growing expectation for First Nations, Metis and Inuit (FNMI) peoples to teach and lead cultural discourse in academia, I am hesitant to admit that I am still learning, out of fear of misrepresenting the community—as if the knowledge gaps would reveal an imposter. While individuals should not feel pressured to reconcile on behalf of the community, the lack of representation within academia often leaves the FNMI collective with a sense of responsibility. I have certainly questioned the extent of my responsibilities and the value of my efforts as a white-passing Indigenous person: My first thought, when approached to participate in this conversation, was, "Why me?" I did not consider myself experienced enough, knowledgeable enough, or Indigenous enough to speak on issues of equity and otherness in academic libraries.

Cultural or racial imposter syndrome often stems from an unstable sense of belonging, resulting in self-doubt amongst individuals whose ethnic or racial identity does not align with social expectations (Salhany, 2022). For me, this feeling meant a need to justify or legitimize my cultural position through pieces of beaded jewelry or regalia, due to the image that Western society has constructed of what I, as an Indigenous person, am supposed to look like. It meant feeling inadequate because I do not speak a traditional language and did not grow up on my reserve. It meant feeling uncomfortable in certain spaces where I do not quite fit, and struggling to show pride in my Indigeneity because I feel like an imposter. It is complex, to say the least: learning to balance personal comfort and security with the fulfillment of unconscious social expectations. I now know that my Indigeneity does not hinge on my physical appearance or my ability to speak Anishinàbemiwin, but I constantly fear that no one else knows that.

When it comes to dealing with imposter syndrome, I have been advised to simply “get used to it,” as this feeling of inadequacy never goes away. I do not appreciate that answer, as it dismisses the issue by reinforcing the idea that I do not belong due to personal, internal struggles. Instead of telling academics and librarians who are a part of marginalized communities that their insecurities are justified, let us reframe the narrative to consider why they feel that way in the first place. Colonial-based institutions are inherently built to exclude othered bodies as they are founded on notions of cultural and racial inequity. If this were not a longstanding issue, the push for equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) initiatives would not today be at the forefront of every institutional conversation. It is one thing to acknowledge, but another to take action, and until diverse voices are actively welcomed by a willing and attentive audience, we remain excluded. I remain excluded, left to question my place: Am I good enough? Am I an imposter? And that is my story.

A Cree Librarian’s Story

My name is Kaia, and I am a member of the James Smith Cree Nation in Saskatchewan. I was born and raised in the Treaty 6 territory of Edmonton Alberta, and now I work in Treaty 7 Calgary, Alberta. The James Smith Cree Nation is under Treaty 6, so when I moved for work I finally had to confront what it meant to be a guest on the land. For me, it means being respectful and learning about the new place I call home.

One of the main things people know about me is that I come from a library family, a biblio-dynasty if you will, where my sister, my father, my grandmother, and my aunt all work in libraries. I have known since high school that I wanted to be a librarian, and the type has shifted through the years: from a community librarian to a liaison librarian. Within the University of Alberta's Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) program, I was one of the few on-campus Indigenous students. However, I never felt as if I should not be there. I can remember growing up and visiting my dad at work when he ran the tiny one-person library in the Native Counselling Services of Alberta. While I was working on my MLIS, my sister was an instruction librarian at NorQuest College. The idea of an Indigenous librarian was not far-fetched—it was the norm for me—but that does not mean that I did not notice that we were part of a minority in the field.

I am not breaking new ground when I say that "Library Land" is tiny, or note the revelation that "Indigenous Library Land" is even smaller. There is an understanding that I cannot just be a librarian: I am going to be an Indigenous librarian and you cannot separate identity from politics. This fusion means that any failure marks failure on the collective, as the individual represents them. The more successful a person is, the harder they fall if they mess up, and if they are part of a minority, they end up taking everyone they represent down with them. The first step in either direction has to do with what jobs they go for.

There is this double-edged sword when it comes to Indigenous-specific job titles: On the one hand, I can choose to be pigeonholed in a job that is connected to my identity, such as an Indigenous Engagement Librarian, or I can specifically choose to go with something not related to my identity, and become a Learning Services Librarian, as an example. There are always the optics to consider: Choosing a job that is not Indigenous-specific shows that Indigenous librarians do not need to be in Indigenous-specific positions. However, an Indigenous librarian also needs to consider if they are doing a disservice by not choosing the Indigenous-specific job that requires someone like them. While job searching, I was always a little hesitant about these Indigenous-specific jobs, because what if I were not the "right kind" of Indigenous that academic institutions were looking for? As someone who is white-coded, I now enjoy having Indigenous in my job titles, both past and present. I was an Indigenous Intern at the University of Alberta and I am currently the Indigenous Cataloguing Librarian at the University of Calgary. Both of these job titles reveal to people that I am Indigenous before they meet me. My job title is a not-so-subtle way of saying, "Hey! This person is Indigenous," even if it leads people to the wrong conclusion. I have found that there is a polite Canadian dance when it comes to Indigenous identity and because of how I look, I am constantly confused for a member of the Métis Nation. I am biracial, but not Métis, and there is a difference. There is also an unspoken but expected emotional labour tied to any position that focuses on a person's identity. Sometimes a person cannot go home and turn off being Indigenous; some things come home with them.

I can remember when the Carrie Bourassa scandal at the University of Saskatchewan occurred in 2021. Bourassa was the scientific director of the Indigenous health arm of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and a professor at the University of Saskatchewan. It came to light that she might not have any Indigenous heritage and was a modern-day Grey Owl (Leo, 2021). Sadly, this is not the first time, nor will it be the last, that this happens. Pretendians offer a distinct problem in academic hiring, with no easy solution. Declaring Indigenous status in higher education is often done through self-declaration forms, which are imperfect. At the same time, there does not appear to be a better solution at the moment as First Nation status is complicated. In Canada, there are Status and Non-Status First Nations. Status First Nations have status cards that show their connection to their specific Nation, while non-status do not. This lack does not make them any less Indigenous, but it does create barriers to acquiring benefits, such as scholarships. Therefore, the problem cannot be solved by requiring people to provide documentation, because not every person may have the required paperwork. Requiring documentation also does not consider the families who hid their Indigenous ancestry in the past and current generations who have rediscovered their identities and want to reclaim them. These issues explain why academic libraries are considering solutions when hiring an Indigenous person for an Indigenous-targeted role, such as mine. If there were an easy solution, I would mention it here. Unfortunately, I have none to offer.

I have several layers of imposter syndrome, as an Indigenous woman and as someone in a tenure-track position. I am constantly questioning if I am Indigenous enough, or if I am the right person for this position. Am I working hard enough, or too hard? I do not want to set expectations too high just to let people down. However, I am reminded of something my mother always says: "You have to keep going, submitting, and doing things. It's someone else's job to count you out; so don't do that for them." I am left asking: Am I good enough? Am I an imposter? And that is my story.

Discussion/Conclusion

Through two presentations on this topic, we have had discussions with audiences on how best to approach imposter syndrome. Key ideas that were discussed included relying on peers, as well as increased mentorship. What was also discussed was the idea that engaging more in your academic role and openly addressing imposter syndrome are tactics to more efficently overcome components of imposter syndrome. When discussing this topic with a group of Canada's Indigenous librarians, tangent but related ideas arose. These included: questioning where the imposter syndrome comes from, whether it is job-related, or related to the perceived amount of Indigeneity a person has. If the latter, connections to heritage, culture, or community can help fight the imposter syndrome as it relates to Indigenous identities. There is also a real fear of burnout, as minority librarians are often put on many committees to represent the Indigenous communities of academic institutions. However, the consensus was that librarians should not be pressured to commit to multiple committees, and, in addition, should be able to admit when there are limitations to expertise.

From the previous literature on the topic, mentorship and demystifying imposter syndrome are incredibly important. There might not be one solution that will work for everyone, but discussing this topic and keeping open communication may make it easier for new librarians. In short, remember that many people are battling imposter syndrome, that it may feel very isolating on an individual level, but that it is possible to tackle it…one onion layer at a time.

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Further Reading

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