**Cultural Imposter Syndrome:**

**An Autoethnography of a Cultural Fraud**

        As the first Afro-Caribbean Student’s Union meeting started up, I gave a sigh of relief that I was not the first to go. In fact, as the third to last to speak, I had plenty of time to listen to everyone else’s turn and gauge just how much information to share.

         Unfortunately, I quickly got swept up in listening to the others speak. Country after country, culture after culture, accent after beautiful accent swept past my ears. Jamaica, the Bahamas, the Dominican Republic, Trinidad; they each painted a beautiful picture of their culture and background in just a few words. When it came time for my turn, I realized instantly that I was not on their level of cultural connectivity.

         “I’m [Student Name], I’m Haitian, and-” I choked on my words, realizing too late that I had not bothered to come up with a fact about myself, and even if I had, it would have been nothing as culturally specific as those who had gone before me.

         Luckily or unluckily, the girl who had spoken first cut me off. “You’re from Haiti? Me too, on my dad’s side! Where are you from?”

         I found my voice finally, but it was hoarse and stilted. “My mom is from Port-Au-Prince, but I’m not- I was born in America. I live in Georgia.”

         “Oh,” she responded, seeming once again uninterested.

         I sunk back in my chair. Feeling like an intruder, I stayed quiet for the rest of the meeting. I never returned to the ACSU.

~\*~

Imposter syndrome has long been an important part of behavioral psychology. It is a very useful lens with which to analyze the behavior of many groups of people, specifically college students, and even more specifically college students at any number of highly-esteemed universities. When I first learned the symptoms of imposter syndrome, I knew instantly that they applied to me. John Kolligan Jr. and Robert J. Sternberg describe imposter syndrome as “perceived fraudulence”, or “the private sense of being an imposter or a fraud.” It is “a subjective experience of perceived intellectual phoniness that is held by several high-achieving adults who, despite their objective successes, fail to internalize these suggestions.”  The APTA describes the three major symptoms of imposter syndrome as, “Feeling like a fraud. Holding yourself to an unreasonably high standard. [And] experiencing fear that you'll be “exposed" or "found out" for not being smart or deserving.”

However, what about when one feels like an imposter outside of the realm of academics? I personally have struggled with imposter syndrome for my entire life, but through more research into this topic I have found the current conversation on imposter syndrome to be incredibly limited compared to my personal experience. In 2010, Magnus Enquist and colleagues conducted a study on the behavioral traits of monkeys. In this study, they found that a monkey with parents who displayed specific and obvious learned behavioral traits were likely to display these same traits, but only if the monkey had two or more guardians who displayed those traits. If a monkey had only one parent or guardian who displayed these traits, it was unlikely to take after that parent, even if that monkey performed the traits in front of them. They titled this study, “One Cultural Parent Makes No Culture,” which I believe to be an accurate description of my situation.

As the daughter of a Haitian immigrant and an American-born black man, I have always felt a disconnect from Haitian culture. This causes a lot of stress and anxiety when I am in situations with others who have a strong connection to their cultures. Even though I claim that side of my heritage, I have very little knowledge about Haitian tradition, language, cultures, or practices. One could even say that I feel like a cultural imposter.

Through these situations in which I am contrasted with those who have very strong cultural connections, I have felt the exact same emotions as when I feel like an educational imposter. Based on my personal experience, it is my belief that the same three symptoms that denote Imposter Syndrome in an educational context can and should be applied to culture as well.

**Method**

An autoethnography is a more subjective but no less useful method of qualitative research. The goal of this genre is to take the writer’s personal history with a topic and synthesize it with an ongoing conversation to more accurately describe the topic. The draw of this genre is that it combines specific parts of the writer’s personal experience with raw scientific or psychological research to create a cohesive narrative backed up by scholarly research.

Of course, this genre of autoethnography does have some drawbacks. It runs the risk of being too limited in its scope, since it generally includes the perspective of only one writer. The genre also has some implicit bias built in, since the writer is writing about their own life. However, this bias can be turned into a positive, since it provides a more specific look at a topic that a researcher may never be able to reach. Overall the autoethnography is an incredibly useful tool of qualitative research and analysis.

 **Imposter Syndrome in the Traditional Sense**

One conversation repeats itself quite often between my friends and my brother and I. A four-way call, a science question, usually brought up by me. Alyssa, one of my best friends, is a Materials Engineer who just graduated from the Georgia Institute of Technology. I love nothing more than to ask her some vague science question and listen to her go on and on about everything she knows on the subject. Her passion is obvious, and her breadth of knowledge on her field apparent.

“See, this is why I love having a smart friend,” I say, almost every time. This, I remember too late each time, is the wrong thing to say.

         “[Student Name], you are the smart friend,” Alyssa will respond, laughing. “You and Trevor are two of the smartest people I know.”

         “Yeah right,” I say, only mostly joking. “Being the smart friend is your thing.”

         “But your SAT scores are way higher than mine,” she responds, without fail.

         “Exactly,” Joshua will chime in, as if we asked.

         “Yeah, but that’s not…” I’ll start, but have no way to explain myself. Not what? Not a proper measure of intelligence? Not representative of one’s diligence and hardworking spirit, which you possess in spades and I can never seem to replicate? Not inclusive of the confusion I feel daily, and how your field comes easily to you and I am constantly being outshone and outscored by the nonmajors in my class? Not what, exactly?

         “Never mind,” I’ll finish, and change the subject quickly.

~\*~

         Well before I identified as a cultural imposter, I knew that the traditional application of intellectual or educational cultural imposter syndrome could be applied to me. Many of my various intersecting identities directly contribute to an increased likelihood of experiencing imposter syndrome. For example, imposter syndrome was first identified among women, and studies have shown that imposter syndrome, while common among many high-achieving students, is significantly more common in female students than in male (Ostrove).

         It was also found that the percentage of students who would say that they had imposter syndrome was significantly higher among STEM students (Ostrove). The President of Harvey Mudd College, Maria Klawe said, “it’s unbelievable how common it is among women in technical fields where there aren’t a lot of other women. The idea is, you’re actually doing fine, but you have the impression that you don’t understand the material as well as others around you, or you get this scholarship or internship and think, “I only got it because I’m female, and they’re going to find out that I’m really not that good… this is a normal way to feel.”

 Sonnak and Towell (2000) found that imposter syndrome is more prevalent among students of lower socio-economic status. “IP feelings were linked to students feeling “out of place” concerning their familial status.” Coming from a working-class background and entering into a world of largely upper-class peers can have a damaging effect on one’s psychological state, which can largely contribute to imposter syndrome.

         In addition to that, imposter syndrome is more likely to occur in high-achieving women of color than anyone else (Lin). As a black, female, working-class computer science major, it was incredibly easy to classify myself as an educational imposter. It is because of this familiarity with the symptoms of imposter syndrome in the traditional sense that I was able to recognize its manifestation in another context.

**Feeling Like a Fraud**

         When I was twelve years old, my family went on a missions trip to Haiti. My mom worked as one of the translators, and I worked with the children at the school we were helping. I remember watching my mother speak fluently in her native tongue to the children. I knew she was telling them that she was Haitian as well, and then I remember seeing her point to my dad and I, to point out her family. A few of the little girls immediately broke off and ran up to me excitedly, tripping over themselves to speak. I knew enough to know that they were asking me to confirm that I was Haitian as well, and when I made the mistake of nodding, they immediately began babbling in rapid-fast Creole.

“No, no,” I stammered, struggling to remember the one phrase my mother had taught me, I don’t speak Creole. When I finally got it out, the girls looked mildly disappointed for a brief second before switching to Spanish at the same speed.

         I despaired. Feeling embarrassed, I returned, “*No hablo español*,” as loud as I could. To placate them I pointed desperately in the direction of my mother, so they could talk to someone who would understand them. The looks of disappointment on the girls’ faces returned, paralleling my own. Silent now, the girls smiled sadly before going to play elsewhere and leaving me alone.

~\*~

         The cornerstone symptom of Imposter Syndrome is feeling like a fraud. Leary et al. said that “believing that one is a “fraud” and that others have been fooled (either purposefully or inadvertently) into an overly positive view of oneself is central to the concept of impostorism.” In fact, Kolligan and Sternberg (1991) refer to “imposter syndrome” and “perceived fraudulence” almost interchangeably, saying, "We believe that the term perceived fraudulence more accurately and precisely captures the technical meaning of the experience than do other terms commonly used in the literature- such as imposter syndrome" (p. 1). I experience this feeling quite often in the intellectual realm, and almost instantly after telling someone that I am Haitian and having them ask for more information in return. Since most information on Haitian culture falls out of my realm of knowledge, this perceived fraudulence is an instant reminder that I am not truly Haitian- at least, not in the eyes of the world.

As it turns out, this perceived fraudulence in a cultural sense is actually tied to imposter syndrome in the traditional, educational world. Lin (2008) found that “women of color with a greater sense of self-worth related to their ethnic and racial identity will likely be less vulnerable to feeling like a fraud intellectually” (p. 25). Although it seems almost self-evident that high-levels of insecurity in other areas would contribute heavily to imposter syndrome, this leap of logic is one that has not been fully applied in the current conversation.

**Unrealistic Expectations**

         “I have an idea.”

         My mother, washing dishes at the sink, neglected to look up at me, instead continuing to focus on her task as she said, “What’s your idea?” Anyone watching from the outside would think that she had heard me utter this exact phrase right before a highly unrealistic or impractical plan a million times before, and they would be right.

         “I think you should teach me Creole.” My mom started to protest, as she always did, but I cut her off. My mother believed it would be a waste of time to teach me Creole, due to its limited usage and her exclusively-conversational knowledge of her native language, and we had had this discussion many times before. This time, however, I was not to be deterred.

 “Just a little bit at a time! Just like, one or two conversational phrases every day, and I’ll keep them in a list somewhere so that I can use them.”

         My mother again looked at me sadly, as if she wanted to tell me that one or two phrases a day was a ridiculous way to attempt learning a language, but instead she looked into my face and sighed. “Okay.”

         And we did… for a little while. Almost a month, even. But oftentimes I forgot to ask her for phrases, or couldn’t recall the ones I had learned earlier, and soon, that plan, like all the others, disappeared.

~\*~

         Unrealistic expectations are another large part of imposter syndrome. Parkman (2016) described how

In the face of faltering self-confidence...impostors strive to minimize [anxiety] by working longer, working harder and seeking perfection. Impostors feel these are the only tools they have to meet expectations. The impostor often over estimates the abilities of others and underestimates the amount of work those individuals put into their success. Reflecting on this leads those with IP tendencies to an extreme emphasis on perfection and effort. As a result, self-inflicted excessive standards for achievement lead to the creation of unrealistic goals that are ultimately unachievable. (p. 52)

 Although I know intellectually that my level of cultural awareness is to be expected for someone with limited interaction with their cultural background, it is almost impossible for me not to have higher expectations for myself culturally.

**Fear of Being Discovered**

         “Mom! Guess what Dad said?”

         My father and I had just come back from a visit to the neighbor’s house. That particular neighbor had come down with a cold, and my dad and I had gone over to bring her tea and other get-well-soon remedies. The visit had been wonderful, until my father had said something in particular that sent me into an anxious frenzy.

         “What, baby?” my mother asked.

         “He told Mrs. Katie that the ginger tea was an ‘ancient Haitian remedy’,” I said, using physical air quotes to illustrate my point.

         My mom stared at me almost open-mouthed in confusion. “Why would he say that?”

         “I dunno, but that’s what they think now. ‘Ancient Haitian remedy’,” I scoffed.

         My mom rolled her eyes and returned to her earlier task, as was her customary response to any foolishness within our family. I, on the other hand, felt jittery and anxious in a way I couldn’t quite explain, my thoughts racing before I could stop them.

         *What if they ask about it? What if they talk to my grandmother when she comes to visit? What if they find out it’s not a real Haitian remedy? Will they think we’re fake too?*

~\*~

         The final, and perhaps most dramatic symptom of imposter syndrome is of course, a fear of being discovered. When one feels like a fraud, the fear that someone else will discover their pretense is always at the front of their mind. Leary et. al (2000) called this a “defining characteristic of imposter syndrome,” saying, “because of this fear of detection, impostors are apprehensive in situations in which their competence is implicitly or explicitly evaluated. Apparently, impostors’ fears can create extreme emotional turmoil; impostorism correlates moderately with indices of psychological distress, including depression” (p. 3).

 In my own life, this fear of being exposed as an imposter in the Haitian community guides a lot of the decisions I make. It is what led me to join the ACSU at the beginning of the school year so that I could actually gain more cultural knowledge, and then to leave again after the first meeting.

**Discussion**

 Imposter syndrome is an important topic within the fields of social science. Its existence has huge consequences for large groups of people, which is why it is so important to be inclusive in its study. Up until now, the conversation surrounding imposter syndrome has been limited almost entirely to the educational sphere, and while that is helpful as a foundation, it must be expanded upon in the future. My experience with imposter syndrome in the cultural world shows that the traditional methods of study and identifiers of imposter syndrome can be applied on a much larger scale. My background is only one example of a larger conversation that can and should be taking place, and more research and study is necessary to fully do this topic justice.

**References**

Enquist, M., Strimling, P., Eriksson, K., Laland, K., & Sjostrand, J. (2010). One cultural parent makes no culture. Animal Behaviour, 79(6), 1353–1362.

Hoffmann, L. (2012). What Women Want. Communications of the ACM, 55(9), 120–119. https://doi-org.proxy.library.emory.edu/10.1145/2330667.2330693

Kolligian Jr., J., & Sternberg, R. J. (1991). Perceived Fraudulence in Young Adults: Is There an “Imposter Syndrome”? Journal of Personality Assessment, 56(2), 308. https://doi-org.proxy.library.emory.edu/10.1207/s15327752jpa5602\_10

Leary, M. R., Patton, K. M., Orlando, A. E., & Funk, W. W. (2000). The Impostor Phenomenon: Self-Perceptions, Reflected Appraisals, and Interpersonal Strategies. Journal of Personality, 68(4), 725–756. Retrieved from http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=3406580&site=ehost-live&scope=site

Lin, S. A. (2008). The imposter phenomenon among high-achieving women of color: Are worldview, collective self-esteem and multigroup ethnic identity protective?. Fordham University.

Ostrove, J. M. (2003). Belonging and Wanting: Meanings of Social Class Background for Women’s Constructions of their College Experiences. Journal of Social Issues, 59(4), 771. <https://doi-org.proxy.library.emory.edu/10.1046/j.0022-4537.2003.00089.x>

Parkman, A. (2016). The imposter phenomenon in higher education: Incidence and impact. Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice, 16(1), 51.

Sonnak, C., & Towell, T. (2001). The impostor phenomenon in British university students: Relationships between self-esteem, mental health, parental rearing style and socioeconomic status. Personality and individual differences, 31(6), 863-874.