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Overcoming Imposter Syndrome and Stereotype Threat

Reconceptualizing the Definition of a Scholar

Callie Womble Edwards

> If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive.
>
> —Audre Lorde

In this critical autoethnography I will explore the theoretical underpinnings of the imposter syndrome, stereotype threat, and intersectionality to give voice to my lived experiences as a young, Black woman in the predominately middle-aged, White, male academy. While retelling the stories of both my childhood and young adulthood, I will speak my truth while connecting theory to praxis. I will also explain how I overcame imposter syndrome and stereotype threat by reconceptualizing the definition of a scholar. In the spirit of the opening quote from Audre Lorde, I had to define myself for myself to both survive and thrive. Finally, I will offer several recommendations for women of color to consider as they navigate their own space and place in the elusive ivory tower.

Theoretical Underpinnings

The imposter syndrome is a phenomenon that was first coined in the 1970s by psychologists Dr. Pauline Rose Clance and Dr. Suzanne Imes to describe feeling like an academic or professional fraud. In their seminal work, Clance and Imes (1978)

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examined women specifically and asserted that "[d]espite outstanding academic and professional accomplishments, women who experience the imposter phenomenon persist in believing that they are really not bright and have fooled anyone who thinks otherwise" (p. 1). Simply put, women who suffer from the imposter syndrome do not feel worthy of the praise they receive on the basis of their academic or professional accomplishments. Instead of acknowledging their accomplishments as achievements that they deserved and earned, women with the imposter syndrome perceive these achievements as overestimations of their gifts and talents. Context plays a vital role in the imposter syndrome as women are looking to others to determine what characteristics make one an authentic academic or professional. In comparing themselves to whom they deem as authentic academics or professionals, women notice differences and begin to feel like counterfeits. This feeling activates the dangerous cycle of women attempting to forecast others' perception of them and then performing behaviors based on those assumed perceptions. In particular, the psychologists observed four different types of behaviors performed by women with imposter syndrome that perpetuate the phenomenon (Clance & Imes, 1978). The first behavior is engaging in diligence, which refers to women working hard to prevent others from discovering their status as an imposter. The second behavior is engaging in intellectual inauthenticity, which refers to women choosing to conceal their true ideas and opinions, and only voicing ideas and opinions they believe will be well received by their audience. The third behavior is engaging in charm, which refers to women seeking to gain the approval of their superiors by being well liked and perceived as intellectually special. The fourth and final behavior is avoiding displays of confidence, which refers to women being cognizant of society's rejection of successful women and consciously exhibiting themselves as timid.

Twenty years later, in 1995, psychologists Dr. Claude M. Steele and Dr. Joshua Aronson coined a separate psychological phenomenon, stereotype threat, to describe feeling at risk of confirming a negative stereotype about one's social group. In other words, individuals who suffer from stereotype threat are mindful of the negative stereotypes associated with their social group and actively seek to contradict those negative stereotypes. In their pivotal piece, the psychologists examined the role of stereotype threat on Blacks in four different experiments (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Together, these experiments demonstrated that awareness of negative stereotypes associated with their racial group's intellectual ability decreased Blacks' standardized test performance relative to Whites. At the same time, efforts to alleviate that awareness improved performance.

While distinct concepts, both the imposter syndrome and stereotype threat underscore the anxiety that some marginalized groups, such as women and people of color, experience based on how they interpret and internalize the perceptions of others. Rooted in the ideologies of privilege and oppression, both phenomena ignite a sense of otherness and propagate the dominant metanarrative. Whether they feel as though they do not belong (i.e., imposter syndrome) or they feel as though

they must prove they belong (i.e., stereotype threat), some marginalized groups are hyperaware of how they are othered, and this awareness influences how they navigate spaces. Instead of being their full selves, they mask, camouflage, or alter their being to be accepted by the majoritarian group. In addition, for individuals who identify with two or more marginalized groups, a third theoretical framework is necessary for this discussion as well: intersectionality. Intersectionality contends that social identities are not additive but multiplicative. Put differently, socially constructed identities can intersect and overlap creating multilayered experiences with identity-based oppression (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Kimberle Crenshaw, a leading critical race theorist and legal scholar, coined intersectionality as she investigated the experiences of Black women. Crenshaw (1991) expounded on her work as follows:

> My objective there was to illustrate that many of the experiences Black women face are not subsumed within the traditional boundaries of race or gender discrimination as these boundaries are currently understood, and that the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately. (p.1244)

For me, the imposter syndrome, stereotype threat, and intersectionality are not just theoretical frameworks for understanding emotion and behavior; they also provide a practical lens into my daily reality as a young, Black woman in the predominately middle-aged, White, male academy. Like many women, I have various intersecting social identities. I am young, Black, a daughter, a friend, a wife, an entrepreneur, a researcher, and a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) to name a few. However, I have always struggled with labeling myself with one particular identity: a scholar. This struggle is the focus of my critical autoethnography.

The Traditional Definition of a Scholar

To begin my storytelling, I believe it is essential to first define the term "scholar". There are two preeminent sources from which I glean definitions. The first is commonplace, the dictionary. *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary* (2017) defines a scholar as follows:

> (1) a person who attends a school or studies under a teacher (i.e., a pupil), (2a) a person who has done advanced study in a special field, (2b) a learned person, and (3) a holder of a scholarship.

As I refer to this textbook definition, my resumé undoubtedly meets the criteria. I have attended school for the majority of life, completing primary, secondary, and postsecondary school, including my graduate degrees, consecutively (i.e., without breaks). Additionally, I have engaged in advanced study as a research assistant in my master's and doctoral programs. Moreover, one of the hallmarks of

the doctoral degree process is narrow and in-depth study on a particular topic via the dissertation. On February 22, 2018, I successfully defended my dissertation study, which focused on the experiences of high-achieving Black male undergraduates in engineering majors. Later, in April 2018, my program faculty selected my dissertation study for the 2018 Higher Education Dissertation of the Year Award. Thirdly, I am a learned, or well-educated, person who has obtained knowledge, skills, and competencies throughout my educational journey. In addition to my high academic grades, degrees, and honors attained, I also profoundly resonate with the concept of "lifelong learning". In my free time, I enjoy studying cultures, visiting museums, reading, and overall expanding what I know and understand about the world. Finally, I have earned a variety of scholarships that have funded my college and graduate degrees. Most notably, I earned the Gates Millennium Scholarship, which is a highly competitive merit and need-based scholarship funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. This scholarship is a good-through-graduation award for undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral studies to use at any accredited college or university.

In addition to the dictionary, I also gather definitions from a more specialized source, my industry, which consists of thought-leaders, mentors, and colleagues. In the higher education industry, we often use the word "scholar" to describe a distinguished academic, someone who has a high intellectual capacity and can advance their field of study. For example, in the American Educational Research Association (AERA), a professional organization for educational researchers, some of the most sought-after awards, fellowships, and application-only opportunities contain the term "scholar" in their titles. Scholars are held in high regard and often praised by others for their brilliance. Even with all the evidence supporting the idea that I am a scholar according to *Merriam Webster's Dictionary*, I have still struggled with the more colloquial definition that we use in academe. Thinking of myself as a distinguished academic, or someone who can advance their field of study, does not come naturally to me. As I reflect, I realize that my struggle with seeing myself in this way began in my childhood.

Childhood Memories

I was raised in Durham, North Carolina, a city known for its extraordinary juxtaposition of high crime rates as well as its close proximity to highly acclaimed institutions of higher learning and one of the largest research parks in the world, Research Triangle Park. Affectionately known as "The Bull City", my hometown is both celebrated and antagonized by the media for its stark contradictions. I have experienced life on both sides of the proverbial tracks. In my early years, my lifestyle in a two-parent home was very comfortable. We lived in a nice neighborhood, and I never remember money being a big issue. However, once my parents split up and their marriage dissolved, my financial status quickly changed, and the shift felt like an epic fall from grace. My mother and I moved to the poorer side of

town, and she had to work multiple jobs to make ends meet. The schools I attended went from well-resourced to less financially stable. I became eligible for federal programs such as free and reduced lunch. Our family vacations ceased as my mother worked more and more hours. Years later, my father also became disabled. So, my childhood, like my hometown, contains stark contractions.

Thinking back on childhood memories fills me with an immense appreciation for my humble beginnings. Overall, I would say I come from a family that is rich in love, but modest in earthly possessions. I am the only child of my mother and father, who divorced when I was ten. Both of my parents graduated high school, and neither graduated from a four-year college or university. Thus, I consider myself a first-generation college student. My mother, a Queens, New York native, became a teaching assistant, and later earned her certification as a certified nursing assistant (CNA). My father, a small town guy from Goldston, North Carolina, graduated from community college with two associates degrees in computer and electrical engineering. My father was, and still is, an avid fan of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, his dream school. Although he never attended the University, he would visit their library often to read and use their computers. In fact, in my early years, while my parents were still together, it became a Sunday tradition for my mother, my father, and I to spend the afternoon in the Stacks. This weekly ritual was my first introduction to college life.

Growing up, my extended family was also very involved in my life. For example, I did not attend daycare as a child. Instead, my mother would drop me off at my maternal grandmother's house every morning before she went to work. At my grandmother's house, I would spend time watching educational television shows such as Bill Nye the Science Guy and Reading Rainbow, reading books, and creating with crafts from our local craft center. Each week my grandmother, grandaunt, and uncle would also take me to our public library, where we would read and check out books. At the end of the workday when my mother returned to pick me up, she would ask me what I learned. The high level of engagement of my family fostered my love for education. They made learning a fun, daily activity. They celebrated my accomplishments, no matter how big or small. They always showered me with praise and spoke positively about my future. From a very early age, it was evident to me that my family—both nuclear and extended—had unshakable faith in my academic abilities. They were confident I would be the first in our family to earn a college scholarship and graduate from a four-year university. In fact, I remember hearing them talk about how I would earn scholarships and attend college before I even knew what scholarships and college were. I, on the other hand, wrestled with an inability to see myself through their eyes. The imposter syndrome reared its head in my childhood in the form of self-doubt. When I would receive praise from my family members for earning good grades I would think to myself, "*That's so sweet of them to say, but I'm not really that smart, I'm just a hard worker*".

So, where did that self-doubt come from? It is important to provide a caveat

here. My self-doubt was not an internal issue. In other words, there was nothing inherently wrong with me that caused me to doubt myself. Rather, my self-doubt was illustrative of systematic issues within the broader social context; and imposter syndrome, stereotype threat, and intersectionality are three lenses that offer language to examine the theoretical constructs that were at play. At the intersections of my marginalized identities (i.e., low-income, first-generation, Black, and female), I constantly encountered academic environments and messages that contradicted the foundation that my family established. People who were low-income, first-generation, Black, and female were rarely in positions of leadership or power in the educational spaces I frequented. Additionally, the news and popular media would typically portray individuals from communities like mine in negative ways, highlighting their "lack of" and neglecting their unique gifts, talents, and contributions. The combination of limited positive representation and overwhelming negative stereotypes caused me to question my ability. Thus, while my family encouraged me that "I could do it"; I struggled with that idea because I rarely saw people like me "doing it". My lived experiences also corroborate research findings. There is no shortage of literature confirming how students from disadvantaged backgrounds struggle with finding their place in privileged academic environments. For example, in exploring the experiences of low socioeconomic status (SES) students in university contexts Jury et al. (2016) found that low SES students face considerable psychological barriers in comparison with their high SES peers, such as emotional distress, identity management issues, and negative self-perception. Similarly, in her review of the imposter syndrome in higher education, Parkman (2016) noted that imposter syndrome scores are higher for minority student populations than majority student populations. Further, the work of Peteet, Montgomery, and Weeks (2015), Martinez et al. (2009), and Terenzini et al. (1996) suggest that first-generation students experience imposter phenomenon more often and at higher levels than their non-first-generation peers.

In elementary school, my self-doubt was compounded by my embarrassing stuttering problem. My childhood physician wrote off my stuttering as a phase. In one appointment he said, "*Whenever she is excited about a topic, her mind moves faster than her mouth. She's very bright. She just needs to slow down*." Although I was in the appointment with my mother and my physician and heard those words, the positive affirmation did not affect me. Instead, I focused on the constructive criticism: *I need to slow down*. Alas, the phase continued. In school, I would stutter so bad that I started to loathe reading aloud. In particular, I remember my third and fifth-grade classes. Ironically, I had the same teacher for third and fifth-grade. My teacher in those classes would have our desks organized in a circle, and as a class, we would collectively read books. Each student would read a paragraph aloud, one after another, until everyone had read for the day. I remember how fast my heart would beat as my turn approached. My mouth would go dry, and my palms would get sweaty. I would look ahead to determine if I had a short or long paragraph.

Taking a deep breath, I would try to read as slow as possible to prevent my stuttering, and still, sometimes that did not work. "Readers are leaders" was a prominent expression in my elementary school. But I didn't like to read out loud, so I often wondered what that made me?

The self-doubt that emerged in my elementary years persisted throughout my middle and high school years and was most noticeable during my senior year in high school. My high school was an International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma granting school, which means in addition to earning a high school diploma; seniors had the opportunity to also earn the IB diploma. The IB diploma is a highly competitive, globally recognized honor awarded to high school students who complete an academically rigorous and socially conscious international course of study. I completed an IB curriculum during my junior year of high school, but I was convinced that the IB Diploma was not for me. To start, in my school students who completed the IB diploma usually had also completed the precursor program, IB Middle Years Program (MYP), in middle school. My middle school did not have MYP, so I did not have the opportunity to participate. Additionally, IB students were looked at as some of the brightest students in our school and district. I felt like an academic fraud. "*I am not the brightest,*" I thought to myself. "*I simply work hard. Surely, if I complete this program senior year, I will be found out.*" The summer between my junior and senior years, the IB program coordinator at my high school scheduled individual meetings with each student and parent dyad to register them for IB courses. Before our meeting, I had informed my mother that I did not want to participate in IB my senior year. Confident in my inability to earn the IB diploma, my plan was for us to respectfully decline the opportunity and instead register for honors courses. In the meeting, the IB program coordinator praised me for my academic potential. "*Callie would make a great candidate for the IB Diploma program this year. I am confident she can earn the diploma.*" Again, I thought this was a kind gesture, but I honestly did not believe this statement. However, during the meeting, my mother and the program coordinator agreed it was best for me to continue with the program. So there I was, an IB candidate. Throughout the year I frequently reminded myself that the likelihood of me earning an IB Diploma was slim. Nonetheless, I completed the required coursework and examinations. After I graduated, I learned that I was one of the handful of students to earn the IB Diploma from my high school that year. It was a historic victory for my high school, which had gone several years without an IB graduate, and it prompted a shift in mindset for me. "*Maybe I am a scholar,*" I thought.

During my senior year, my self-doubt was also omnipresent when I was applying for scholarships and colleges. As stated previously, my family had an academic vision for my life since I was a little girl. However, I always saw their vision as too far-fetched for my abilities. As a high school senior, I applied to all safe schools, or schools in which I was confident I would be accepted. I did not apply to any reach schools, or competitive schools in which I was unsure if I would be accepted. I

vividly remember a conversation with my older cousin during this time about my college decisions. My cousin, who graduated high school and never attended college, asked me which colleges I was considering. When I read my list of schools, he looked puzzled. "*Why aren't you applying to the top universities in our area? We have Duke, Carolina, and NC State. You belong at one of those kinds of schools*." As per usual, the affirmation did not affect me. Although he saw me at "those kinds of schools," I did not see myself there. Similarly, around the same time, the Gates Millennium Scholarship application became live. One of my friends, a recent alumna of my high school, earned the scholarship the year before me and encouraged me to apply. "*You would be perfect for this, Callie!*" she asserted. "*That's so kind of her, but I would never earn a scholarship like that,*" I thought to myself. Luckily for me, my mother had also heard about the Gates Millennium Scholarship. Unlike me, my mother believed in my ability to earn a scholarship of this magnitude and told me to apply. As a respectful daughter, I did as I was instructed. Over the next few months, I carefully completed the application which consisted of writing eight essays, providing records of my academic, leadership, and community service activities, and enlisting both a nominator and a recommender. Once submitted, the waiting process began and continued for several months. Countless times I reiterated to myself, "*This scholarship is out of my grasp*." Yet, that script changed when I came home to a large envelope from the Gate Millennium Scholars Program. Bursting with excitement, I ripped open the envelope, and one word stood out to me, "Congratulations". Instantly, my heart sank. "*I did it*," I thought. When I received notification that I had won the award, I was genuinely shocked. Out of the 13,000 applicants that applied that year, I was one of the 1,000 to receive this ten-year funding opportunity. This moment was transformative for me because it was the first time I truly saw myself through my family's eyes.

Early Adulthood Memories

Being a Gates Millennium Scholar allowed me the privilege of pursuing higher education without fear of the price tag. In the fall of 2008, I enrolled in one of my safe schools as a freshman undergraduate student. Initially, I could not envision myself at any other type of college outside of safe schools. Selecting the safe school that I attended was a nonhazardous choice because it did not threaten my concerns of imposter syndrome or stereotype threat. No one would be able to determine that I was an academic imposter at a safe school, and I was not likely to confirm negative stereotypes about my affiliated social groups. I reasoned that a safe school was the ideal setting for me because it would satisfy both psychological phenomena I had battled in my childhood. However, astonishingly, my perspective on safe and reach schools changed during my first semester of college. While taking 18 credit hours with a bulk of science and mathematics classes and earning a high GPA, I realized I was not being academically challenged. I was accustomed to performing at a high

level because of my training with the IB program, and I desired a more intellectually stimulating environment. I was amazed that the institution I chose because it felt non-threatening to my feelings of imposter syndrome or stereotype threat now felt restricting to what was possible for my future. I wondered how much more I could learn and grow in a setting that challenged me more. In short, my academic life at my safe school left me yearning for a reach school experience. Recognizing that my needs were not being met at my current institution, I took a leap of faith and decided to apply to a reach school to enhance my experience. The decision to transfer was one of the best decisions I made in my early adulthood. It represents the first moment in which I choose to see myself as a scholar, or distinguished academic, instead of someone choosing that perception for me. I assumed ownership of my destiny and began to create an academic vision for myself. At my new institution, a predominantly White institution (PWI), I was mentally stretched and gained a host of fond educational experiences.

I went on earn both my undergraduate and master's degrees from my reach school. It was there I was introduced to research and began conversations with faculty and staff about earning a Ph.D. To my surprise, conversations with majoritarian faculty and staff at this institution also extended the imposter syndrome and stereotype threat I felt during my childhood. Two distinct conversations from the first year of my master's program are etched in my memory. These conversations were with my then academic advisor and my program's student support staff member, respectively. My academic advisor was an old White man, and the student support staff member was a middle-aged White female. Initially, I saw both of these individuals as allies because they were a part of my academic community and they were knowledgeable about the Ph.D. process. My academic advisor earned his Ph.D., and the student support staff member was a Ph.D. candidate at the time. As a first-generation college student, I felt unsure about what steps I would need to take to successfully transition into a doctoral program following my master's program. Thus, I requested individual meetings with each of them to discuss my future goals of earning a Ph.D. In our conversations, I was jarred to find that both individuals highlighted my flaws and used these flaws to convince me that I should pursue other post-graduation options instead of a Ph.D. program. For example, after disclosing how I did not perform as well as I anticipated on my first biostatistics exam, my advisor harshly reminded me that I was "*going to have to do well in statistics in a Ph.D. program*." Similarly, after disclosing how I did not have full-time work experience yet, because I enrolled in my master's program immediately after my undergraduate studies, the student support staff member suggested I "get some work experience first," and when I do apply, look at other programs because my top program was "*too difficult*." I include these interactions in this manuscript not to villainize my former advisor or student support staff member, but rather to draw attention to the difference between intent and impact. In actuality, I do not know what the true intent of their statements was, but their impact was damaging.

While I recognize the importance of candid feedback, tone and context are equally significant. When I unveiled my Ph.D. aspirations to both these individuals, I was vulnerable and seeking a safe space to explore the possibilities of a path no one in my family had traveled before. Though they may have been well-intentioned, the statements from my former advisor and student support staff member reiterated negative cultural stereotypes I had heard in the media about individuals from marginalized backgrounds like mine. The takeaway message was simple: *People like me do not belong in Ph.D. programs*. Their feedback was incredibly hurtful, particularly because of their positioning. These were two higher education professionals tasked with facilitating student growth. I admired and confided in them, and their insensitivity pierced me. At the same time, their criticism was also remarkably motivating as I embarked on a journey to prove them wrong, a phenomenon that researchers have found when studying how Black males persist in engineering majors (Moore, Madison-Colmore, & Smith, 2003). Aligned with the findings of Moore & colleagues (2003), I vowed to demonstrate that people like me do belong in Ph.D. programs, and I persevered without the guidance of my then advisor or student support staff member. I share this part of my journey as a cautionary tale to higher education faculty and staff members. As university gatekeepers, faculty and staff members have a responsibility to create inclusive environments. A solid grounding in imposter syndrome, stereotype threat, and intersectionality can provide a theoretical understanding of the complex social realities facing many historically marginalized students and insight on ways to support them. I encourage well-intentioned faculty and staff members to become familiar with these constructs and allow their awareness to inform their engagement with, and ultimate impact on, students. Thankfully, I persisted in spite of the discouragement I felt, but not all students experience the same outcome.

Two years later, on August 16, 2014, I officially began my doctoral coursework at a large Southern PWI, my top choice program, as a newly minted 24-year-old. My birthday was nine days before the start of classes. Pursuing a doctoral degree was a goal I set for myself when I earned the Gates Millennium Scholarship and learned that the scholarship would pay for education up to the doctoral degree. As a stipulation of the award, any time between degrees had to be approved by the scholarship administrators to remain eligible for additional funding. As such, I decided to pursue my undergraduate, master's, and doctoral degrees consecutively without any time breaks. So, there I was on August 16, 2014: sitting around a large table with my cohort members as we each introduced ourselves to our program faculty. As I sat there listening to the lived experiences of my fellow co-learners, descriptors of my own identity rang loudly in my ears. Young. Black. Female. Low-income. First-generation. Unmarried. Without children. Without full-time work experience. I was so different from everyone sitting around me. "*I'm the minority of the group in every way*," I thought. As each person shared their story, negative stereotypes of my own group membership echoed in my mind. I thought about the undesirable

perceptions of my hometown, low-income students, and the first-generation students. I wondered if they would think I was naïve and unsophisticated because of my background. Would I stand out? Would I fit in? I was suddenly brought back to my early memories as a child who stuttered when trying to read aloud. "*Do I belong here?*" I internally questioned. "*Maybe I do, but I will need to prove myself*." This self-talk began my journey from experiencing imposter syndrome and stereotype threat to discovering my own unique sense of belonging and balance. Now, four years later, I realize I belonged there all along. So, what happened? In order for me to both survive and thrive, I reconceptualized what it meant to be a scholar.

Reconceptualizing the Definition of a Scholar

When I first started my doctoral coursework, I became hyperaware of how often the term "scholar" was used in my industry. As I read research articles, contributed to class discussions, and participated in professional organizations, it felt as though the term "scholar" was always highlighted. Every time I encountered the phrase, I would notice it—probably more than others around me. After deep introspection, I discovered that I had received and internalized implicit messages about what a scholar looked like and how a scholar acted since I was a child. I pictured someone like Bill Nye the Science Guy or Albert Einstein: an older White male scientist in a lab coat. I imagined someone from a two-parent home, someone in the middle class, someone whose family legacy included college. I was convinced that scholars did not come from my neighborhood or eat free or reduced lunch. Their parents were not divorced or disabled. They did not experience financial difficulty. They were not poor. They did not have stuttering problems. They did not deal with self-doubt. Scholars were always confident, always on-point, always perfect. It was as if scholars were a five-course meal at a five-star restaurant and I was a $5 fill up box from Kentucky Fried Chicken. Again, these expectations were never explicated stated to me, but they were reinforced in the television programs I watched, the books I read, the teachers I saw, and the types of career and professional advice I received from faculty and staff. I did not see myself reflected in the educational system, which made it difficult for me to see myself as a scholar. I must provide a clarification; these implicit messages were the result of macro-level factors such as racism, sexism, classism, and ableism. The unspoken assumption was that scholars represented dominant social identity groups, such as those who were White, male, affluent, and able-bodied, not subordinate social identity groups, such as those who were people of color, women, poor, or disabled. Armed with the knowledge of these implicit messages and their influence, I decided to exercise the power of my voice and dismantle my previous notions that were rooted in oppression. Thus, I began an iterative process to create my own explicit message about what it meant to be a scholar to me. For months I journaled, examined my past experiences, and

analyzed the world around me. My method was not without limitations, but the benefit was immeasurable. By expanding my definition, I was able to see myself, and others who had traditionally been excluded from my mental portrait.

I began my reconceptualization process by exerting a conscious effort to make the invisible visible. My previous conceptualization of scholars only included individuals from dominant social identity groups, so I wanted to intentionally incorporate individuals from subordinate social identity groups in my new conceptualization. I revisited the Merriam-Webster definition of a scholar as well the definition of a scholar that is generally referenced in my industry of higher education. Then, I started to educate myself on historical and contemporary figures that met the dictionary and industry definitions of a scholar and identified with one or more subordinate social identity groups. For example, who was both a Black woman and had completed advanced study in my field of higher education? Further, who was both a first-generation college graduate and considered a distinguished academic in my field? This exercise helped me expand my cognitive database by visualizing new images of who could be a scholar. Concurrently, I also began to affirm the ways in which I also met those definitions. While it was my former routine to shy away from that label, I now began to integrate it into my daily self-talk by reminding myself of how I fit the description. After adjusting my internal dialogue, I started to externally assert my new self-confidence by creating and sharing the hashtags #TheLifeOfAScholar and #iLookLikeAScholar on social media. I used these hashtags to distribute images on social media that endorsed scholars from subordinate social identity groups. Social media gave me an outlet to promote my reflections, interrogate the dominant narrative, and enlist supporters.

Once I established more holistic images of who I visualized as a scholar, I further expanded my conceptualization by probing the definition of a scholar as per the Merriam-Webster and my industry. I began to question if these definitions were complete and contemplated what particular elements were missing. As I journaled my observations, two omitted elements rose to the top of my list: an attention to diversity of backgrounds and an acknowledgment of failure. First, I will discuss the diversity oversight. Both definitions covertly support the idea that scholars originate from a particular lived history. For example, one of the Merriam-Webster's definitions of a scholar is a "learned person"—but how do we determine who is learned and who is not? One prominent cultural assumption is that learned people attend and graduate from college. Although I am an advocate for formal education, I also contend that schooling is only one way of knowing. There are many ways people can gain information and education outside the traditional classroom setting, and therefore, academic grades, degrees, honors, and awards cannot be the barometers for all learning. For example, I am a first-generation college graduate, but that does not mean I am the first learned person in my lineage. In fact, quite the contrary is true. My heritage is full of learned people, including creators, strategists, cultivators, organizers, implementers, and artists. I am a descendant of learned people

from a rich variety of backgrounds even though they did not attend or graduate from college. Thus, it became essential that my reconceptualization of the term "scholar" include diverse ways of learning and knowing.

Next, I will address the failure inadvertence. Both definitions glamorize triumph. For example, one of Merriam-Webster's definitions of a scholar is a "holder of a scholarship", or someone who has been successful in earning a scholarship. Similarly, in higher education, we use the term "scholar" to refer to someone that has accomplished a significant feat that moved our field forward. While victorious instances should certainly be celebrated, exhibiting these moments exclusive of accompanying missteps perpetuates the falsehood that perfection is possible. However, all humans will inevitably make a mistake, and that reality is not reflected in either definition. For instance, consider someone who applied to a scholarship and was not accepted on their first attempt. If they try and fail, and later try and succeed, does that make them any less of a scholar? The more I thought about it, the more I resisted the idea that a scholar had to be perfect. The academic publishing cycle provides a wonderful illustration. As academics, we submit our work to peer review to be published. It is rare for academic pieces to be accepted without revisions on the first submission. Still, if authors adhere to reviewer commentary, they are more likely to secure a later acceptance. Now in this example who is the scholar—the author who was accepted on the first submission or the "revise and resubmit" author? I would argue that both are—the second scholar's journey just included what some may perceive as a failure.

As I continued to deliberate how failure was not included in either definition, I noticed a new relationship; both the imposter syndrome and stereotype threat were connected to the fear of being perceived as a failure. Whether concealing their true academic identity (i.e., imposter syndrome), or being mindful of negative cultural stereotypes (i.e., stereotype threat), both phenomena avoid the perception of failure. I wondered how socially reframing failure might change the constructed realities of those who suffer from these phenomena. For example, if having a flaw or error was not chastised by society but instead accepted as integral to the human experience, would those with imposter syndrome or stereotype threat still feel as though they had to protect a façade of perfection? Further, how would those with imposter syndrome or stereotype threat feel if they understood that they do not have to accept other people's perceptions of them as their reality? In other words, what if failure was assumed to be both ordinary (i.e., everyone fails) and subjective (i.e., failure means different things to people depending on their positionality). In thinking about my childhood, I imagined how this modification would have liberated me. Perhaps I would have relaxed more in the third and fifth grade when it was my turn to read aloud, or when it was my turn to introduce myself to my doctoral classmates for the first time. In analyzing these ideas, it became paramount that my reconceptualization of the term "scholar" normalize failure as a self-defined, inescapable aspect of human nature that is also an important antecedent for growth.

Through an extensive reflection and writing cycle, I arrived at my new conceptualization of the definition of a scholar. I now define as a scholar as someone who consistently strives to learn while concurrently educating others. Scholars embody the spirit of the expression "lifting as you climb," They come from a wide variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, including races, ethnicities, cultures, and religions. Scholars can gain their education formally or informally, and engage in a variety of ways of learning and knowing. No matter the concept, some scholars that get "it" on the first try, and other scholars need several opportunities to grasp "it." Nevertheless, scholars persist. Scholars think inside, outside, and around the box. Scholars make mistakes, scholars grow, and sometimes failure is a part of the process that brings about a scholar's evolution. Ultimately, scholars decide what success and failure look like for them.

Giving voice to my reconceptualization of a scholar was a profoundly empowering experience. Immediately, I began seeing myself, and others like me, as scholars. At the same time, it was sobering to fathom the amount of time and energy I wasted comparing myself to the prior, less holistic definitions of a scholar. Furthermore, it was upsetting to realize how I allowed my self-doubt to limit me from being my full self. I am incalculably grateful that others, such as my mother and mentors, saw potential in me, which encouraged me to pursue some life-altering opportunities, but I wonder what opportunities I missed in the process. Because of this, I desired to start a movement that would have been beneficial to me as a child. As such, during my tenure as a doctoral student, I developed two educational organizations that allow me to share my reconceptualization of scholar and help those from historically underrepresented and marginalized communities such as my own see themselves reflected in this definition. My first organization, The Life Of A Scholar, LLC., is a consulting firm whose mission is to promote the holistic development of scholars of color across the lifespan. Comparably, my second organization, The Scholar Academy, LLC., is a training institute for scholars of color. These organizations work together to promote my new conceptualization through events, support services, and media. Since starting these organizations in 2015 and 2016 respectively, I have coached and mentored scholars of color across the globe. My outreach work through The Life Of A Scholar, LLC. and The Scholar Academy, LLC. is deeply meaningful to me; it allows me to exemplify my conceptualization by helping others along my journey.

Recommendations

Reconceptualizing the definition of a scholar was how I found my space and place in the elusive ivory tower. My route was winding, but eventually, I unearthed a sense of belonging and balance that resonated with me. Aligned with my conceptualization of a scholar as someone who both lifts and climbs, I would like to share three recommendations for women of color to consider as they navigate their own

paths. My first recommendation is to be gentle with yourself as you are navigating your way. Once I learned about the imposter syndrome, stereotype threat, and intersectionality I was elated, empowered, and energized. At last, I had a language to give voice to my experiences since childhood. Since I was now educated on these theoretical frameworks, I believed I would never suffer from them again. This assumption could not have been further from the truth. The reality is we are all still figuring it out. Even as I write this manuscript, there are still aspects of imposter syndrome and stereotype threat that I am yet overcoming. In some ways, I think I will always be in the process of unlearning what I was implicitly taught and relearning what I intentionally taught myself—and that's okay. I now have the tools to identify what I am feeling which helps me make more informed decisions moving forward. So, what does being gentle with yourself look like in practice? For me, being gentle means that when I see myself acting in a way that reflects imposter syndrome or stereotype threat, I do not criticize myself. Instead, I acknowledge these phenomena are prompted by systemic issues, and thus allow the moment to inspire critical reflection on the social context I am experiencing. I ask myself introspective questions to understand the root of the issue such as: What am I feeling? What about this situation provoked this emotion? What power differentials are at play? How does the environment contribute to the situation? What messages are being promoted explicitly or implicitly? How does this current situation relate to my past lived experiences? By asking these types of questions, I can move my internal self-talk from a place of condemnation to one of emancipation. Cognitively, I use this exercise to acknowledge that my feelings of self-doubt are almost always rooted in societal factors, and while I am not responsible for creating these factors, I do have the power to reprogram how I think and react to them. I employ my new conceptualization of a scholar to support my mental shift.

As I navigate my way and reorient how I make meaning of the environment around me, I have found that isolation can be emotionally taxing. Academia can be a cold, lonely, comparative and competitive place, especially for those experiencing the intersections of marginalized identities. While reassembling how I envision and respond to my ecosystem, being in fellowship with individuals I trust has helped me develop a sense of belonging. Therefore, my second recommendation for women of color is to take time to seek out, utilize, and, if needed, develop a community. Sometimes the community is already created for you, such as a support group, and all you need to do is seek it out and utilize it. Other times, the community is not apparent, and you must do the labor of developing your own community. I have found myself in both scenarios and can attest that sometimes it takes a while to find your "perfect fit." At first, I thought the academic advisor and student support staff member from my master's program would provide me the support I needed, but I was sadly mistaken, which left me both defensive and apprehensive about seeking support at the doctoral level. However, I am grateful that I did not allow those negative experiences to prevent me from the invaluable benefit of being a part

of a close-knit community. In 2015, I joined a strong support network for Black women doctoral students and professionals to seek solace. This organization, called DIVAS (Distinguished, Intellectual, Virtuous, Academic, Sistas), became an oasis to me as a doctoral student and remains a part of my life now that I have graduated. These women have become my mentors, sista-docs, friends, and even guests at my wedding. We have shared so much in just under four years. In addition to this organization, I also have developed other fulfilling, mutually beneficial personal and professional relationships with people I know and trust. In the confines of these relationships, I can vent, unmask myself, and be comforted. These relationships continue to be a great compliment to my introspective process I discussed in my first recommendation. The moral of the story is to find your tribe. Identifying those who are sincerely there to uplift you can be vastly challenging but also immeasurably rewarding.

My third and final recommendation for women of color is to celebrate your successes—no matter how big or small. The importance of applauding milestones is a lesson that I learned from my family, and admittedly it took me a while to learn it. Throughout my educational journey, my family consistently praised my accomplishments; they were intentional about letting me know that my victories mattered. Meanwhile, my pattern was to be especially attuned to my constructive criticism, and apathetic to my achievements. This cycle was both exhausting and miserable. Without pausing to acknowledge and affirm what I accomplished, I found myself disheveled. I regularly felt burnt out because I did not find, or rather make, the time to commend myself for a job well done. Taking a moment to recess and celebrate allows you to silence self-doubt, appreciate your talents, and infuse joy in your journey. Now, I intentionally modify my behavior to a more balanced approach of applauding and improving. In the midst of striving to be a better me, I also prioritize delighting in my wins. Sometimes I celebrate internally, through self-reflection, journaling, prayer, and worship. Other times I celebrate externally, such as sharing my special news with my family and friends or indulging in excursions to my favorite spa and comedy club. I encourage you to find a way to celebrate that is meaningful to you and engage in it often. I have found that building my own reward system helps me to center myself and enjoy my journey more.

Conclusion

In this critical autoethnography I discussed pertinent memories from my childhood and young adulthood using the theoretical lenses of the imposter syndrome, stereotype threat, and intersectionality to contextualize my experiences. While systemic issues unquestionably prompted the self-doubt I experienced throughout my narrative; I also shared how I prevailed (and continue to prevail) over the imposter syndrome and stereotype threat by reconceptualizing the definition of a scholar. I began this critical autoethnography with a quote from Audre Lorde and would like

to return to this quote as I close. As she affirms, I had to define myself for myself. It was not enough for my family and mentors to see me as a scholar. I had to see myself that way for the title to become real to me—I had to believe in myself. I hope that my story encourages women of color, particularly from backgrounds like my own, to also see themselves as scholars.

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