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Our Comeback Story: Impostor Syndrome in the Archival Profession

April K. Anderson-Zorn, Michael Andrew Davis,
Danielle Nowak, and Alison Stankrauff

ABSTRACT

In 2019, a group of archivists participated in two conference sessions focused on impostor syndrome in the archives field. Though no comprehensive study on impostor syndrome has been undertaken in the archives profession, the authors listened to numerous stories of the phenomenon among audience members. This perspective article considers the presence and impact of impostor syndrome in the archives field. The authors define the phenomenon, review literature on its influences in the information science profession, include stories of archives professionals working with impostor syndrome, and offer suggestions for working through impostor syndrome.

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KEY WORDS

Impostor syndrome; Professional development; Professional identity;
Feminized professions; Toxic workplace; Interpersonal dynamics;
Workplace communication; Collegiality

Whether new professional or seasoned veteran, many of us in the archives profession have had a pushy patron, a demanding donor, an unprofessional colleague, or a moment in our careers that has made us think, “Am I cut out for this line of work?” Those who have experienced these moments of doubt often feel alone in their thoughts, and, though their work can prove otherwise, some may believe they have fooled those around them into believing they belong. These feelings are attributed to a pattern of thinking known as impostor syndrome. In 2019, several presenters participated in two conference sessions focusing on impostor syndrome in the archives profession: the first at the Midwest Archives Conference annual meeting in Detroit, Michigan, and the second at the Society of American Archivists annual meeting in Austin, Texas. Building on those conference sessions, we collaborated to review relevant literature and suggest next steps for archivists dealing with impostor syndrome.

This article serves as a starting point to suggest further discussion, research, and action for combating impostor syndrome in the archives field. It is divided into three sections: the first reviews impostor syndrome literature, including literature focused on impostor syndrome in the library science field; the second includes stories from archivists who have experienced impostor syndrome; the third offers tips for combating impostor syndrome and suggests next steps for all archivists looking to combat the phenomenon in the profession.

What Is Impostor Syndrome?

The phrase “impostor syndrome” describes a person’s internalized notion that, despite their accomplishments, they do not belong among their professional and intellectual peers. Individuals internalize this perception, believing they are “impostors” in their profession and “are convinced that they have fooled anyone who thinks otherwise.”¹ The individual then lives in a perpetual cycle of fear, believing someone will eventually find out they are a fraud. Psychotherapists Pauline R. Clance and Suzanne Imes first coined the term “impostor phenomenon” in 1978, pointing to “early family dynamics and later introjection of societal sex-role stereotyping”² as among the highest contributors to developing its symptoms. In the subjects they studied, the researchers found that women battle internally with societal expectations and their own self-expectations. Though they acknowledge that men do suffer from impostor phenomenon, their 1978 research found it with less frequency in men.

Before Clance and Imes’s work, psychologist Matina Souretis Horner researched a phenomenon she called “fear of success.” In her 1969 dissertation, *Sex Differences in Achievement Motivation and Performance in Competitive and Non-Competitive Situations*, Horner studied achievement motivation for both men and women in competitive and noncompetitive situations. In her research, Horner

introduced a method for measuring how a person avoids success and found that women are far more likely than men to avoid success in competitive situations.³ This research later led Horner to explore women in professional fields, particularly male-dominated fields. She found that many women have a fear of succeeding in these fields, as societal norms for women dictated that they not be “aggressive,” and to achieve success in their fields would open them up to criticism.⁴ Horner’s later work further explores her “fear of success” theory and shows achievement-oriented women mostly try to avoid success in their fields due to their fear of societal backlash.⁵

Like Clance and Imes’s work, psychologists Joan C. Harvey and Cynthia Katz also explored impostor phenomenon in their 1985 book, *If I’m So Successful Why Do I Feel Like a Fake: The Impostor Phenomenon*. They found that for many, impostor phenomenon is “a psychological pattern rooted in intense, concealed feelings of fraudulence when faced with achievement tasks” and that those suffering from impostor phenomenon “attribute success and achievement to external sources such as luck, charm, and good social contacts rather than to internal qualities of intelligence and ability.”⁶ Before writing her book, Harvey created a scale to measure whether a person is experiencing impostor phenomenon and to what degree. Clance created her own scale a few years later. Both Harvey’s and Clance’s scales are tools used for patients in clinical settings.

Through the 1980s and 1990s, researchers continued to explore impostor phenomenon to better define the conditions, symptoms, and treatments. Researchers at the State University of New York at Buffalo conducted research with an undergraduate class in 1990 to test the validity of the phenomenon and identify attributes among students who identified as impostor or nonimpostor. Researchers found that, for those who identify as impostors, one negative experience among a set of achievements may set them back. Impostors may focus on the negative experience, despite several successes, and question whether they could repeat additional success.⁷ In 1993, a group of researchers (including Clance) tested the effectiveness of the Clance IP Scale and the Harvey I-P Scale in determining if an individual is suffering from impostor phenomenon. Additionally, the researchers examined previous studies on the use of impostor syndrome scales in diverse populations. The researchers found inconsistencies in gender statistics and whether the adverse effects of the phenomenon are triggered by a task or by “interpersonal skills.” These findings led them to define a scale that impostor phenomenon researchers could reliably use. The researchers also determined the Clance IP Scale to be the more sensitive of the two scales. As the study surmises, “The capacity to correctly identify imposters and nonimposters through the use of the Clance scale should facilitate the investigation of a number of other interesting questions, such as the incidence of the IP in general as well as in high-achieving populations, and the determination of

those covariates that make the experience of the IP personally and emotionally debilitating for some individuals and not for others.”⁸

Gender, more often than race, was often the focus of early impostor syndrome research. In her earlier work on “fear of success,” Horner speculated that white, middle-class women are most likely to be sufferers of fear of success, while nonwhite women are less likely to experience this phenomenon due to societal constraints preventing success. This racially disparaging conclusion is common among Horner’s peers of the era, as noted by Dana Simmons in her review of researchers of race and impostor syndrome. Simmons’s review found that impostor syndrome researchers of the 1960s and 1970s typically fall into two categories: researchers who only saw impostor syndrome afflict high-achieving women and researchers who focused on “achievement motivation.” Researchers of achievement motivation sought educational methods for secondary education students in primarily low-income and minority schools. For these researchers, low-income and minority students were, in their assumption, at greater risk for giving up on learning. Simmons states, “Where educational research takes low minority achievement as a real problem to be countered, psychologists of the Impostor Syndrome take impostorism as a false problem of self-perception, to be corrected.” Simmons concludes that the first is “impossible to cure,” while the second is “perceptual and curable.”⁹

IMPOSTOR SYNDROME IN THE INFORMATION SCIENCES

Until recently, little research into impostor syndrome and its effect on information professionals existed. However, a comprehensive 2014 study by Melanie Clark, Kimberly Vardeman, and Shelley Barba prompted several new articles and research studies. No similar studies yet exist that examine impostor syndrome in the archives profession.

In their study on impostor syndrome in academic librarians in the United States and Canada, Clark, Vardeman, and Barba found that one in eight librarians may be experiencing impostor syndrome “to a significant degree.”¹⁰ Using the Harvey scale, the authors based their findings on the survey results of 352 library degree (or equivalent) recipients holding academic librarian employment. Of the respondents, most were female, while the least represented demographic was those ages of thirty or younger. The authors did not find a difference in gender (despite the high number of female-identifying respondents). However, they do indicate high levels of impostor syndrome in younger and/or newer librarians. Along with new professionals, the authors also note a high level of impostor syndrome among tenure-track professionals with less than three years of experience. Non-tenure-track professionals also show high levels of impostor syndrome. Using their data, the authors looked for triggers that set impostor

syndrome in motion: “In addition to having less familiarity with their positions, another cause of these feelings could be the competitiveness, isolation, and other pressures often found in academic culture.”¹¹ In their research and analysis of their data, the authors note, “. . . it appears that IP feelings are detrimental to both individuals and the organizations they work for.”¹²

Jill Barr-Walker, Michelle B. Bass, Debra A. Werner, and Liz Kellermeyer found results similar to those of Clark et al. in their study of health science librarians and impostor syndrome. The authors found that, out of 703 respondents, one in seven reported feelings of impostor syndrome. Respondents tended to be in academic medical libraries with no degrees in the health sciences field. The authors found that younger librarians and those with less experience as health sciences librarians tend to show higher instances of impostor syndrome. In their research, the authors also explored conference presentations, blog posts, and other evidence of health science librarians experiencing impostor syndrome and found, “In these personal reflections, librarians share observations of self-doubt, minimization of their accomplishments, and the importance of recognizing imposter phenomenon.”¹³ The authors also acknowledge the advantages in understanding education and experience concerning impostor syndrome and, like Clark et al., found “significant differences in the means of imposter scores for years of experience.”¹⁴

Similar to Clark et al. and Barr-Walker, authors Bridget Farrell, Jaena Alabi, Pambanisha Whaley, and Claudine Jenda, in their study of the effects of racial microaggressions, impostor syndrome, and burnout in librarians, found younger and newer library professionals more likely to experience impostor syndrome. When one experiences racial microaggressions and impostor syndrome, they can experience burnout: “A number of organizational dynamics can contribute to burnout, including rigid, highly politicized climates; particularly competitive environments; work tasks that are routine and repetitive; and organizations in which employees receive little reward or acknowledgment for their contributions.”¹⁵ In their research, the authors could only find two recent studies that examine racial microaggressions and LIS professionals of color. And, while a need exists for support of librarians experiencing these phenomena, Farrell, Alabi, Whaley, and Jenda admit identifying those in need is hard, as they often isolate themselves from their peers to avoid being “found out” as sufferers of impostor syndrome. The authors suggest psychosocial mentoring for minority LIS professionals and that mentors should build awareness of racial microaggressions, impostor syndrome, and burnout in their institutions. They also indicate that mentors in positions of power “serve as advocates for their mentees.”¹⁶

Authors Jennifer Brown, Jennifer A. Ferretti, Sofia Leung, and Marisa Méndez-Brady also advocate for mentoring to combat impostor syndrome, particularly for minority information professionals. In their article, the authors call

librarians at all levels to action and advocate for holding “themselves accountable for the ways in which they are complicit within systems of oppression and inequality.”¹⁷ For example, the authors recall what employers told them is considered professional attire or speech, thus adhering to outdated social norms. However, when instructed on these presumed norms, the authors were essentially told not to be Black: “Black women, in particular, are told just how our natural coils should be shaped to conform to work-appropriate standards, as one author has experienced countless times before.”¹⁸ And when these women conform, they are still targeted: “many women of color are mistaken for students on campus, and then treated as though they are inexperienced or lack expertise.”¹⁹ The authors propose mentorships and creating community in overcoming impostor syndrome within the profession. For Brown et al., speaking at persons of color (POC) mentoring groups has been helpful: “When we’ve been selected to participate, we have relished the opportunity to discuss whiteness in librarianship in a supportive space.”²⁰

Speaking as a library administrator, Jose Diaz suggests ways to combat impostor syndrome at the organizational level. He recommends that administrators incorporate training into the organization and to remind staff that education is crucial to one’s job. Diaz also suggests administrators emphasize what their employees “do well”: “Library administrators, particularly middle managers, should help librarians focus on their own deep and essential domain of expertise. Their skills and expertise are different but no less valuable than what professors or graduate students bring to the table.”²¹ When asked about her view on counteracting one’s doubt when it concerns complicated technology, librarian Sally Pewhairangi points back to library training: “Library training overlooks the importance of confidence.”²² She continues by saying, “Believing that you are capable is vital because if you don’t believe you can, whether you are able to or not doesn’t matter.”²³

IMPOSTOR SYNDROME IN LIS PROGRAMS

Some authors believe that potential impostor syndrome sufferers can be identified and helped early in their careers, even as early as graduate school. In their article, “Navigating Imposter Syndrome: A Workshop for Emerging Librarians,” Emily Carlisle and Jordan Bulbrook reveal thinking that they were the only ones experiencing impostor syndrome in the information science program at Western University. After talking with peers, they realized they were not alone. To combat it at their institution, Carlisle and Bulbrook held a workshop on addressing and working through impostor syndrome. They asked participants about the successes they had while in school, which helped them understand that they were qualified to be in the program. Facilitators also provided

tools for working through impostor syndrome, including “recording positive feedback, joining groups or volunteering, following relevant library and information-related social media accounts, and keeping the IS (impostor syndrome) dialogue open with their peers.”²⁴ The authors add that holding the workshop for their program “makes a case for incorporating conversations about IS into MLIS programs, in order to provide the tools needed to overcome IS before it has already surfaced as a barrier to one’s early career success.”²⁵

Sajni Lacey and Melanie Parlette-Stewart also believe that impostor syndrome starts as early as library school when schools offer little guidance in moving into the workforce. Once in the workforce, new professionals have trouble understanding and adjusting to different institutional cultures and norms. These new professionals are often given the “Let me show you your desk” approach and offered little mentoring or orientation. Also, many positions lack clarity in the scope of their duties. While it may be an instructional librarian’s position, it may require a variety of departmental background knowledge.²⁶

Authors Jessica Martinez and Meredith Forrey use their own experiences as new professionals to show how they experienced impostor syndrome in the workplace. In one example, they “identified their greatest feelings of impostor phenomenon as occurring when they were put in front of a group of undergraduates, expected to impart some form of wisdom.”²⁷ The authors suggest talking to a friend, sharing personal stories, and having a “beginner’s mindset” in combating impostor syndrome: “the beginner’s mindset is the idea that beginners see all the possibilities open to them and are more easily able to question the status quo than those with the habits and knowledge of the expert.”²⁸

As authors Elina Lee and Paige Morfitt found, some early career librarians leave the profession when impostor syndrome becomes an insurmountable obstacle. In their review of surveys and literature specific to women and women of color in technical service positions, Lee and Morfitt found disparities in gender and race. The authors point to “prestige hierarchy of unclear and shifting rules,” which leads to self-doubt in some workers, while others leave the library profession altogether. The authors also give impostor syndrome as a reason for qualified workers leaving technical service library positions. They use studies that suggest librarians of color are at a disadvantage because of microaggressions and “preconceived notions of personalities based on stereotypes” that prohibit them from celebrating successes without “second guessing” their accomplishments.²⁹ The lack of representation, feelings of isolation and exclusion, and added challenges are issues that can be addressed when experiences are shared, and libraries and library schools are open to speaking about the pitfalls of their programs. “Having library schools address the challenges of being a woman in technical services and talking about the experiences of librarians of color can help inclusion as it removes the ‘other’ that is oftentimes not talked about.”³⁰

Archivist Stories of Impostor Syndrome

Archives professionals are no strangers to impostor syndrome. Our two 2019 presentations generated numerous audience stories from diverse colleagues who had experienced varying impostor syndrome episodes. While no comprehensive study on impostor syndrome in the archives profession exists, our colleagues voice concerns about the phenomenon.

This section offers three first-person stories of impostor syndrome by archivists in the field. The stories were presented in two sessions both titled “My Comeback Story: Overcoming Impostor Syndrome in the Archival Profession,” the first at the Midwest Archives Conference annual meeting on April 5, 2019, in Detroit, Michigan,³¹ and the second at the Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting on August 5, 2019, in Austin, Texas.³² The first archivist describes how he discovered impostor syndrome “triggers” in his workplace and how he addresses episodes. The second archivist discusses her professional identity and the difficulty she experienced transitioning from college to an entry-level position. The third archivist details how a toxic workplace inflamed the impostor syndrome feelings that followed her through her many years in the profession. While all three archivists are at different points in their careers, they all struggle with feelings of fraudulence and self-doubt. All three archivists discuss their unique ways of combating impostor syndrome.

STORY 1: IMPOSTOR SYNDROME FROM A MALE PERSPECTIVE AND COPING STRATEGIES

When I (he/him) volunteered to contribute to this publication and the impostor syndrome panel at the 2019 Society of American Archivists meeting, I was surprised by comments from other organizers about the difficulty of finding a male voice to participate. As an archivist with nearly fifteen years of experience, I questioned if I was unique among other male archivists in struggling with impostor syndrome at this point in my career. This was proven untrue, however, when several midcareer male audience members approached after our panel presentation to confirm that they, too, struggle with feelings of being a fraud. I hope that sharing my experience with impostor syndrome helps other archivists—including males in the profession—understand that they are not alone and that my personal coping strategies prove beneficial to any archivist suffering from impostor syndrome.

My impostor syndrome has existed throughout my entire career. I initially noticed feelings of fraud almost immediately after starting my first entry-level archives position. At the time, I contested those feelings with the knowledge that I was new in the profession and that I still had much to learn, and I

consequently believed that my impostor feelings would fade as I gained more experience. This was not to be, however, as my impostor syndrome increased as my career progressed. I found that as I moved to higher responsibility roles, became more professionally connected, and gained a leadership role in my local archives association, I paradoxically felt less confident in my ability as an archivist than when I first entered the profession.

Despite the growth of my impostor syndrome, it is not usually at the forefront of my emotions; instead, various triggers cause it. For me, these triggers include having a heavy workload, not having immediate answers to in-person reference questions, lacking immediate solutions to pressing digital preservation issues in my repository, and losing specialized subsets of archives knowledge that I do not use in my current position, such as advanced preservation and conservation techniques. Once my impostor syndrome is triggered, I experience several overwhelming emotions, including feelings of being a fraud (and being discovered as such), panic, and intense fear of harm to my career. The final symptom can be the most debilitating for me, as it leads me to worry about what would happen if I were reprimanded and ultimately terminated after being “discovered,” leaving me unable to provide for my family.

In the past few years, I began using strategies to manage my impostor syndrome symptoms. The first and simplest strategy is to review my professional accomplishments to remind myself that I do belong in my position. Reminding myself that I participated in a wide array of projects at three very different repositories is a quick way to reassure myself that I have the knowledge and skills to do my job. I also try to take positive feedback from colleagues earnestly (rather than wave them away as polite conversation) and, when impostor feelings are especially intense, review a file of positive feedback that I compiled. Another response I employ is to wait the impostor feelings out by focusing on a project that I know I can accomplish well. In my case, this could be something as simple as catching up on capturing news releases or running fixity checks on our digital holdings. Many times, the work of completing the project itself reinforces the feelings of belonging, causing impostor feelings to subside. Finally, and most important, I talk to family members or trusted colleagues about my impostor feelings. I also speak frequently with a counselor about my experience with impostor syndrome, which helps me better understand my feelings.

It is also worth mentioning that my experience with impostor syndrome is not entirely negative; alongside the adverse emotions I experience during an episode, the resolution of that episode can sometimes lead to increased productivity. After I combat a wave of fraudulent feelings with the strategies previously mentioned, I often reflect on the current state of my archives, identify inefficiencies or outstanding issues, and critically think about strategies for

improvement. Examples of such improvements include the creation or revision of archives procedures, the rethinking of collecting policies for regularly published materials, and the processing of several “low-hanging fruit” items in our backlog. While it is never pleasant to feel like a fraud, extracting small “wins” from an episode of impostor syndrome can demonstrate your worth as an archivist to yourself.

In conclusion, I believe that I will always struggle with impostor syndrome and have come to understand that no “silver bullet” exists to put it behind me. Incorporating these strategies, however, allows me to reduce the effects of impostor syndrome so that it does not impede my work or cause overwhelming anxiety about the fear of “being discovered” by my colleagues. I highly encourage other archivists who feel like an impostor to use these strategies and hope that a dialogue can begin among all archivists about their experiences with impostor syndrome and how they cope.

STORY 2: EARLY CAREER IMPOSTOR SYNDROME

My current role has been my first full-time librarian/archivist position since graduating with my master’s degree in library science in July 2017. Prior to being hired into my current organization, I (she/her) was employed in various part-time library/archives roles while working full time as a manager at a fast-casual restaurant chain. While I am immensely grateful for the professional experiences I had prior to accepting my full-time archivist position, going from environments where I had projects and duties decided for me, to a situation where I became the person making the decisions for collections and materials was quite a culture shock. Additionally, while working in my restaurant management job, I had always been the “person in school.” Losing this part of my identity, even though I had been striving for it for nearly seven years, brought on its own set of psychological challenges and self-doubt.

I first noticed my impostor syndrome taking its toll during the interview process, not just for my current role but also in interviews for any position that required some degree of archival experience or knowledge. While being asked questions regarding my archives-related experience or education, I feared that the interviewer would take note of my limited application of technical jargon or scoff at my limited duties in previous positions. The interview process never got any easier for me, at least until after I successfully landed my first full-time archives job. Given this, I anticipated being insecure about entering this new role. After my phone interview, I can distinctly remember thinking, “I guess I was in over my head on this one, better luck next time.” Then, after my in-person interview feeling, “That was a learning experience, I will get the next one.” So, when I got the phone call with an offer, I was both overjoyed and astonished.

However, what I did not anticipate was still feeling so insecure six months into the job. I would find myself at home, web searching “what to do if you are bad at your job.” Down in a rabbit hole of Reddit threads and Quora questions, I discovered the concept of impostor syndrome. During my search, I found a 2018 *Medical News Today* article³³ that identifies five different impostor syndrome types. Of these five, I found myself relating most to “the superhero”; I was so eager to prove myself after stepping into my new role. Through a lot of what I perceived to be hard work, I wanted to assure my new employer that they had selected the right candidate. I wanted to be an example to all my former restaurant colleagues that if you stick to your goals, it is possible to obtain a job that you are passionate about. And, finally, I wanted to show myself that I deserved to be there. Despite the work that I had put into the profession and my education, I was still filled with guilt about being the person who got the job over other deserving candidates.

To combat my feelings of guilt and a desire to reassure myself and my new colleagues, I took on what I now realize was unnecessary work. I tried to incorporate nearly every collection or material into some sort of project. If a project did not get completed in the time frame I set or produce the results I desired, it only perpetuated that feeling of not deserving the position. In addition, I was also combating the loss of no longer being “the person in school.” I had finally accomplished my goal and made it out of a work environment that was detrimental to my mental health. Despite this, I still missed my regular customers, favorite coworkers, and the comfort and familiarity of working in a place for six-and-a-half years (which was, at the time, my entire adult life).

After I identified that I was dealing with a serious case of impostor syndrome, I decided to confront it. The first and possibly most helpful step that I took was engaging with the archival community. I joined listservs and Facebook groups, attended conferences, and participated in local programs and archival-related events. Participating in these programs taught me that I am not alone, and that an entire community of professionals fighting the same struggles can help. I also gave myself time to learn my new role and workplace culture. Becoming familiar with our patrons, their interests, and their needs helped me successfully determine programs and projects that would succeed for both of us. Finally, I decided to be kind to myself. It is a constant process, and I am not always successful at it, but making an effort to acknowledge the impracticality of expecting perfection from myself at all times has been helpful in my overall professional satisfaction.

STORY 3: AM I REALLY GOOD ENOUGH? ARE YOU SERIOUS?

I (she/her) have been a professional archivist for seventeen years. And, if you count my years as a student working toward that professional degree, this is my twentieth year in the archival arena. I love deeply what I do. Like so many of us, what made me gravitate to the profession—and continues to draw me—is a deep passion for and curiosity in a trifecta of history, social justice, and the empowerment of people with knowledge. These are the lures that keep me energized.

I have had the pleasure of growing a tremendous amount in this space of time as a professional, and I keep seeking to do so. This path toward growth has not been without its pockets of bumps and doubts. I should say that I've never doubted my love for the historical record, archives, and helping people with information. But I admit to—at times—doubting myself.

I would like to say that I feel confident about myself in my professional and quotidian life, and mostly I do. I have had moments, though, when I am not as solid in my self-assuredness. I have prided herself on working hard to build my career over this significant set of years. I am also a feminist, and, as such, confidence in myself has been very important. I understand these things closely and believe that confidence as a woman, as a professional—and as a female professional—are essential. That said, I have not experienced this throughout my professional career. I am aware of this and try to keep developing self-love and self-confidence.

I battle perfectionism, feeling like I fail to do enough. This creates a potentially nonstop cycle of feeling that no matter what I do, I can never make an adequate dent in the work. And, furthermore, any work that remains unfinished is not sufficient to the standards that I hope for.

Often, I have attributed my professional success to luck. Akin to so many folks in academia who struggle with impostor syndrome, I feel that I have duped people into believing that I am smart—and that I am really not as smart as people may tell me. The feeling that none of my accomplishments are that significant can be powerful and toxic.

I have also had the bad luck that a toxic workplace compounded these unhelpful and potentially obstructive feelings manufactured on the personal level. Working in an environment without encouragement or the room to grow exacerbates any impostor syndrome that you battle on a personal level. Impostor syndrome can manifest in different ways for different people, but its end result is always the same: that you are unable to acknowledge the real success that you have had.

A workplace that does not acknowledge your success and does not want you to achieve more success can take a real toll on your psyche. As a victim of

impostor syndrome, you already feel that your successes are imaginary, or that they happened out of sheer luck.

Working within a structure that does not support you is demoralizing to even the most self-assured worker. A toxic workplace can either create impostor syndrome, or it can exacerbate it. Being in a toxic workplace meant that the low level of impostor syndrome that I had managed up to that point grew, multiplied, and spread like mold. This has been perhaps the most challenging time for me in my professional life. I initially listened to the chatter from former coworkers who met the criteria of workplace bullies. They tried to make me feel like I was not good enough to work there, which is, of course, what one suffering from impostor syndrome already feels. The poison of this chatter takes root, and it takes a lot of strength, determination, and realization to battle it.

I went on a real journey of self-discovery and learning on how to build myself up. I battled this though a multilayered process. First, I distanced myself emotionally from the toxicity. Getting myself away from feeling in the middle of the toxicity really helped me see that it was not me.

I also sought the guidance and input of several wonderful people to help give me perspective—that I'm not an impostor. These have included friends, colleagues, a women's toxic workplace workshop, a career counselor. They were invaluable in giving me feedback.

Ultimately, though, it was up to me to build up the amount of strength and self-love required to realize the truth about myself: that I am an archivist who has indeed accomplished some significant things in my professional trajectory. I successfully reframed my thoughts and responses and joined in supportive environments. I practice self-care daily and give myself affirmations. Realizing my worth and the reality of my professionalism has been quite a voyage. But I am stronger for it.

Next Steps

These three narratives highlight only a few of the many diverse stories of impostor syndrome in the archives profession. In addition to the presentation at the Midwest Archives Conference 2019 annual meeting, we also collaborated for a presentation on August 5, 2019, for the Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting in Austin, Texas. We also worked together to create an article for the May/June 2020 issue of *Archival Outlook*.³⁴

Along with this article, we hope these conversations help to spark a broader discussion of impostor syndrome in the archives profession.

CONDUCT A SURVEY OF IS IN OUR PROFESSION

We recommend a survey regarding impostor syndrome in the profession, similar to the study conducted by Clark, Vardeman, and Barba in 2014. Such a study would include archivists from varying repositories, including museums, public libraries, government, and institutions, as well as solo archivists. Archivists come from a variety of educational backgrounds and previous professional experiences. As this article has shown, librarians can experience episodes of impostor syndrome as early as graduate school. While the profession can explore ways to address impostor syndrome in archives students, what can our professional societies do for those who come to the profession through other avenues? What can we do for archivists who work in solo offices or those who are new professionals with unexpected managerial responsibilities? A study of impostor syndrome in archival professionals can inform our educational institutions and professional organizations how to help archivists combat archives-specific impostor syndrome issues. Given the size of such a study, sections of the Society of American Archivists could join together to survey Society membership. Potential sections could include Accessibility and Disability, Archival Educators, Archives Management, Archivists and Archives of Color, College and University Archives, Diverse Sexuality and Gender, Human Rights, Independent Archivists, Issues and Advocacy, Lone Arrangers, Students and New Archives Professionals, and Women Archivists. Sections could partner with the Regional Archival Associations Consortium to reach outside of SAA's membership for additional data. With the results, the Society could take proactive steps to help combat impostor syndrome among its membership, staging workshops, annual meeting events, and other informational sessions.

IMPOSTOR SYNDROME WORKSHOPS FOR LIS PROGRAMS

We recommend developing impostor syndrome workshops for LIS programs, similar to Emily Carlisle and Jordan Bulbrook's workshop at Western University. As previously cited, several authors point to intervention to catch impostor syndrome early in an information professional's career.³⁵ Also, LIS programs can self-evaluate their own potential biases that may inadvertently cause microaggressions and other harmful patterns among their student communities. Examples seen in the articles by Brown, Ferretti, Leung, and Méndez-Brady and by Lee and Morfitt show that outdated social norms, stereotyping, and unclear institutional hierarchies create situations that can cause information science professionals to experience impostor syndrome and cause some to leave the profession.

DEVELOP MENTORSHIP PROGRAMS

We recommend that graduate students, new professionals, and anyone suffering from impostor syndrome find a mentor or mentorship program. The Society of American Archivists offers the Mentoring Program for archivists at all career levels, as do many regional archives organizations.³⁶ At Loyola Marymount University, the William H. Hannon Library held the first annual People of Color in Library and Information Science (POC in LIS) Summit on July 13, 2018. Organizers wanted to challenge participants in their roles as workers in information science and dispute common narratives. The summit encouraged participation among attendees by sharing their work experiences with others. Presentation topics included microaggressions, retention, stereotyping, and ways for participants to disrupt ageism, sexism, and racism. Seventy-eight information workers from forty institutions attended the summit, which “was a space to support the research of POC librarians and created a network of information workers for future collaboration and self-care.”³⁷ This new network of mentors and mentees is an example of how a professional community can offer support, skill sets, and tools to those suffering from the cycle of impostor syndrome.

Conclusion

Research on impostor syndrome in the information science profession suggests that gender, race, and job experience are critical factors that contribute to an individual’s sense of feeling as though they are an impostor in their profession. However, this internalized perception of not being “good enough” to work among intellectual or professional peers is not solely limited to a specific gender, race, ethnicity, age, or career path. Sometimes factors such as outdated institutional norms, lack of professional support, and lack of community can contribute to one’s feeling of self-worth. As seen in our personal stories, anyone can be susceptible to feeling like an impostor within their field. A study of the prevalence of impostor syndrome among archivists is needed to begin to understand the depth and complexity of the phenomenon in the profession. With this data, the profession can begin to combat impostor syndrome by implementing workshops and mentorship programs aimed explicitly at stopping impostor syndrome in an individual before it takes hold. Ultimately, understanding impostor syndrome will benefit archivists by creating a healthier and even more united profession.

NOTES

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- ³⁵ See earlier citations for Carlisle and Bulbrook's article on creating a workshop; Lacey and Parlette-Stewart's discussion of mentoring for new professionals; Martinez's and Forrey's experiences as new educators; and Lee and Morfitt's recommendation that library schools address the difficulties women and women of color face in technical service roles.
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