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# Imposters in the Sacred Grove: Working Class Women in the Academe

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The authors of this paper take a critical approach within ethnographic narrative to explore issues of power, class and agency in their experiences as working class women in the academe. After first revealing their working class roots through personal narratives, they employ Clance's Impostor Phenomenon to explore and discuss their experiences as working-class women within the Sacred Grove of the academe. Results seem to indicate a dichotomy between their working class values and the expectations of university academics. Results also reveal that men faculty are their current allies, indicating that, for these three working class women in the academe, class is more of an issue than gender. The researchers conclude that they are negotiating the impostor phenomenon while accepting their outsider status. Suggestions for further research are included.

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# **Impostors in the *Sacred Grove*: Working Class Women in the Academe**

by  
**Melanie L. Long, Gaye Ranck Jenkins, and Susan Bracken<sup>+</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

The authors of this paper take a critical approach within ethnographic narrative to explore issues of power, class and agency in their experiences as working class women in the academe. After first revealing their working class roots through personal narratives, they employ Clance's Impostor Phenomenon to explore and discuss their experiences as working-class women within the *Scared Grove* of the academe. Results seem to indicate a dichotomy between their working class values and the expectations of university academics. Results also reveal that men faculty are their current allies, indicating that, for these three working class women in the academe, class is more of an issue than gender. The researchers conclude that they are negotiating the impostor phenomenon while accepting their outsider status. Suggestions for further research are included.

## **Introduction**

Don't peek; don't look behind the facade! If you do, you just might discover that I don't belong here--that I do not fit neatly into the prescribed mold of the academe.

This is often the fear of the working class academic. This fear is compounded when one is a working class *woman* entering the academe. Despite the influx of women and minorities into the academe, the prescribed mold of the academe requires that one be (or become) upper class, white, and male. At the very least one must assume the characteristics attributed to upper class white males in the academe. Characteristics such as rational thinking, scientific objectivity, intelligence, and proper speech are valued. Members of the working class are considered to be stupid, uncouth and irrational. Women are perceived to be emotional, irrational and are also frequently perceived to be less intelligent than their male counterparts. Both women and the working class lack the ability to be objective, according to the perceptions of upper class white males who continue to dominate the culture of the academe. Women, especially working class women, are not perceived to be capable of traversing the route into the *Sacred Grove*. A working class woman cannot hide the fact that she is female, but through cultivating the characteristics treasured by the academe, she can construct the façade necessary for acceptance into the *Sacred Grove*.

In *Women of Academe: Outsiders in the Sacred Grove*, Aisenberg and Harrington (1988) present the oppositions between the "marriage plot" and the "quest plot" that women with doctorates face. The marriage plot defines the old norms and proper roles of women: "what women *should*

want, the way they *should* behave, and the choices they *should* make" (p. 6). The quest plot is not included in the choice because the "marriage plot preempts alternatives" (p.7).

The old norms contained in the marriage plot conflict with the requirements of the quest plot whether the quest is for academic or professional attainment. The quest, classically, is a journey, actual or allegorical. In it the protagonist sets forth to find something that is missing and, in many cases, needed by the whole society for its deliverance or continued well-being. (p.14)

While the marriage plot applies to *all* women, the quest for academic attainment does not apply equally to the working class whether one is male or female, black or white. Hartman (1991) delineates the quest plot further by dividing it into the quest plot and the profession plot. "A quest plot begins with women's decision to work toward a doctorate and a profession plot begins, when, fully credentialed, they enter the job market" (p.16).

The quest plot prescribes knowledge and authority as its goals, the profession plot prescribes (sic) tenure, rank, salary, and teaching as few students as possible. The quest plot leaves routes to its goals improvisatory; the profession plot prescribes a route whose turns are precisely marked and whose speeds are strictly enforced. It calls for a fast-track career, that is, a career with full-time employment and high productivity. (Hartman, 1991, p. 17)

Thus, in addition to the facade taken on by working class women entering the academe, working class women academics face obstacles particular to their "positions" in Western society.

Working class women, by virtue of their class, face unique obstacles or barriers when they decide to follow the quest plot. Working class women lack the social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 1993) necessary for success in the *Sacred Groves* of the academe, as do male members of the working class. All members of the working class also face financial constraints not faced by members of the middle and upper classes. Working class values, such as the working class' perception of work, also can adversely impact the quest plot. Working class women face class-based familial demands, such as child and elder care, household responsibilities, et cetera that are traditionally considered "women's work", in addition to working for a paycheck and academic "work" demands, that inhibit their ability to traverse the route into the *Sacred Grove*. These obstacles make it extremely difficult to "negotiate the turns of the route at the enforced speed."

Working class women academics must continue to negotiate the demands of their working class home lives while negotiating the upper-class world of the academe. These obstacles and constraints may contribute to mainstream academy members' perception of working class women as "not acceptable." In other words, as well as feeling that they are Impostors in the academic world, working class women academics may not have the social capital deemed necessary to navigate and become successful in academic culture.

## **The Impostor Phenomenon**

The impostor phenomenon refers to the secret belief held by many accomplished women that they do not deserve the success and recognition that they have earned. They are convinced that they are truly less competent and less intelligent than they appear to be and are terrified that their

charades will eventually be discovered (Clance, et al., [1995](#)). The impostor phenomenon has its origins in the woman's interpersonal relationships within her family and in societal norms. Both the family and female gender role socialization in a predominantly male-normed society coincide to form impostor feelings.

A girl whose family never recognized or celebrated her intelligence does not integrate intelligence into her self-concept. When as a woman she is shown to be intelligent, she is likely to distort the experience to keep it congruent with her sense of self. She may acknowledge the fact of her accomplishment but will misinterpret the method by which it was achieved, perhaps stressing her hard work or the leniency of the instructor rather than emphasizing her ability. (p. 83)

Thus, she devalues her own abilities, because within her family system her experiences are generally unsupported and selectively validated.

In Western societies, that which is socially desirable in males is different than that which is valued in females. The qualities which are recognized as "essential to success and achievement - independence, assertiveness, power, self-confidence, and directness - are the qualities against which a woman must defend if she is to maintain an image of herself as feminine by societal standards which she has likely internalized and over-learned by a very early age" (Clance, et al., [1995](#), p. 83). Members in a society are expected to act in certain ways. Women, as part of the society, unconsciously internalize these "ideal" feminine qualities and expectations.

Thus they often do not expect themselves to be successful. They do not look for support to return to school. They do not expect their lovers to type or edit, or even to take their work seriously. They are not surprised when they work harder and longer than others do. They may think impostor phenomenon feelings are normal and not seek help, or they may even deny that they are successful enough to suffer from the impostor phenomenon (p. 86)

Common symptoms of the impostor phenomenon include feelings of phoniness, self-doubt, inability to take credit for one's accomplishments, generalized anxiety, fear, lack of self-confidence, depression, and frustration due to the inability to meet their own standards of achievement (Brems, [1994](#); Clance, et al., [1995](#); Fried-Buchalter, [1997](#)).

She may report feeling overwhelmed by tasks, even those similar to previous assignments that she has successfully completed. She may procrastinate and later become immobilized by deadlines and her fear of failure. She might even begin to avoid all intellectual challenge, as she struggles with a constant fear of being unable to maintain the "façade" of success. If she over-prepared, she will tell herself that she must work harder than others to be successful, and thus she is an impostor. If she procrastinated and finished in a flurry, she will tell herself that she fooled them again with a last-minute hurry-up job, and thus is an impostor. (Clance, et al., [1995](#), p. 80)

Before reading the articles on the impostor phenomenon, we had included the word "impostor" in the title of this paper, and as we learned more about this phenomenon we thought, "This is us! This is how we have been feeling and acting!"

## **Ethnographic Narrative as an Evaluative Tool**

### **Method**

Ethnography, the writing about people, seemed an ideal choice of inquiry for our purposes. Ethnography emphasizes the "meanings which human beings use to structure and construct their existence" (LeCompte & Preissle, [1993](#), p. 28). Additionally, educational ethnography examines processes of power and interaction between teacher and learner within a sociocultural context (LeCompte & Preissle, [1993](#)). Since class is based in hierarchical positions within society and the academe, using narratives seemed to provide a way to look at class through a critical lens. As we articulated our experiences, we recognized that we were looking through a critical lens tinged by the oppression of our class and gender. Additionally, ethnographic narrative allows the researcher to document unique and common patterns of experience (Denzin & Lincoln, [1993](#)). Our use of narrative assisted us in revealing the relationships between the higher education institution and the development of the professional academic, nee the working class woman graduate student.

Our purpose for using the autobiographical narrative is to capture the problematic way academia supports the exclusion and silencing of working class feminist women. Through discussion and reflection upon our stories, we attempt to tease out the ways we have negotiated the impostor syndrome to achieve a new stance within the *Scared Grove*.

### **Procedure:**

The research group was self-selected. The data was generated through three in-person one-hour and two-hour discussions. Data was also generated through several email discussions and telephone conversations. These discussions and conversations produced general themes that led to the collection of data through narratives. Each of the research group members wrote a narrative that reflected her experiences based in the themes. Data analysis took place over a period of several weeks through email correspondence and with an in-person final meeting.

### **The Odyssey of Our Lives: How Far Have We Come?**

An odyssey - a long wandering voyage marked by many changes of fortune - would be an accurate metaphor for our lives.

### **Susan: A Journey in Progress**

My father is an immigrant. He moved to a small town outside of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania when he was a young child. My grandparents (his parents) were Polish and Italian and worked off and on as a coal miner (my grandfather), and as a janitor (my grandmother). Later, most of my relatives went to work in the steel industry. My father left home and joined the military before he completed high school, and spent 20 years in the Navy. While in the Navy, he completed a high school GED, and studied college-level engineering, along with several languages, through a military-sponsored correspondence school with the University of Maryland. While stationed in

Germany, he met and married my mother, who left her family behind in Germany to travel with our family.

My brothers and I were born in Morocco and lived around the world, mostly in the Mediterranean and Middle East, until we moved to the States when I was ready to start high school. Eventually, we settled in State College, Pennsylvania. Even now when we visit with my dad's side of the family, they don't ask questions like "How is your job going?" Instead, they ask, "Are you working?" Working can't be taken for granted, because in their world the steel and mining industries were not viable enough to guarantee jobs.

After high school, I worked a variety of jobs ranging from waitress to retail, and secretarial work. When I saved enough money, I started college part-time, and worked full-time at 2 or 3 jobs to complete my undergraduate degree. My first daughter was born during my last year of school. After completing school, I made the decision to become a housewife.

My husband's family members are dairy-farmers. However, by the time we met, he was working for one of his relatives as a printer in a local print shop. He continued to work in the print shop for 14 years. When our first daughter was two years old, and I was pregnant with our second child, he decided to give college a try. I went back to work at the local university as a shift supervisor in the library.

Generally, our families were puzzled - it didn't make sense to them that someone with a family (or without one for that matter) would quit a decent job to go to school - to sit around and read books! While he was in school, our second child was seriously ill and hospitalized or under medical supervision for four years. Our medical bills and student loans grew immensely, and added to the pressure of trying to meet school and family expenses. After six years of hard work, and a huge amount of debt, he completed his bachelor's degree and returned to work - this time as an engineer in a local manufacturing plant.

In spite of the fact that I did not enjoy my job, I couldn't envision myself doing something else - I didn't have a lot of actual "job skills" and couldn't afford not to work with our student loan debt and family expenses.

Due to the encouragement of many of my co-workers as well as my husband, I decided to try graduate school part-time, while I continued to work full-time for the university. After 8 years of part-time study, I'd had enough! We decided that I would take the chance of finishing the degree full-time. I had been working with the university long enough, I knew the opportunities available, and I was able to obtain a graduate assistantship to finance my schooling and pay expenses at home. This is where I am now - trying to begin my dissertation as a full-time graduate student.

## **Gaye: The Road to Higher Education**

My mother grew up in a small city; her father worked for the railroad and her mother worked in a variety of jobs in between having 10 children. My father was raised on a farm; his father was also raised on a farm. My parents are both high school graduates. My mother has enough artistic

talent that her high school teachers urged her to continue her education, but the family had no money to send her. Additionally, my father's teachers urged him to go to an agricultural college, but again there was no money. During the first 15 years of my life, my father was a tenant farmer on a dairy farm; however, when I was 15, he went to work in a small town on a maintenance crew and became a self-taught electrician. He also worked part-time as an independent electrical contractor. My mother worked in a non-union factory for over 20 years. She was (and still is) very interested in government and liberal politics. While my father helped organize and was the first president of his local union shop, he is a political conservative. Both my parents are avid readers. My brother and I grew up as socially active children, believing in hard work, reading-to-know, doing what you say you believe, and having the desire to help others.

My own working life started early and has been very diverse. Between the time I was 13 and 15, I had my own bakery business. I awoke every Saturday morning at 6:00 a.m. to bake bread, rolls and sticky buns for my four regular customers. When I was 15, I did piecework ironing for a doctor's wife. However, I began my hourly-wage-working career as a short order cook and waitress when I was 16.

While my brother worked hard on the farm during his teen years, my mother had planned for him to go to college, which he did. On the other hand, I showed very little aptitude toward academic subjects, preferring an active social life (and my parents couldn't afford to send us both to college anyway). Therefore, when I graduated from high school, I immediately went to work full-time. I first worked as a hotel maid and then in the factory where my mother worked. A year after high school graduation, I married my first husband. I continued to work in the factory and then in an insurance production office until my first son was born. My ex-husband was abusive. Work became a refuge from my "real" life. In the factory and the insurance production office, I was the most competent employee - in control of my environment. When my son was three months old, my marriage broke up. I remained a single, working mother for three years, when I met and married my current spouse. Throughout the following years I continued to work at several jobs: insurance proofreader and rater, quality control inspector in a factory, state park ranger, and office coordinator. I never saw these jobs as a career. These jobs did not challenge me for very long, any more than being a mother and wife did. During this time, I became interested in feminist politics and began reading about the history of women's rights.

Then, in 1986, I went to work in a domestic violence and rape crisis center. My first position was as a crisis intervention specialist. I found that I was excellent at problem solving and at helping people from diverse backgrounds. Eventually, I became a recruiter and volunteer coordinator and a training and orientation specialist. My co-workers began giving me books on feminist thought. During this time, I began to become politically active. I wrote letters to government officials and marched on the state capital several times in support of battered women and reproductive rights.

In 1993, at age 42, I decided to go to college full-time. I quit my job when my employer told me that it would not be possible to work around a part-time class schedule. I applied and was accepted for a 2-year Associate Degree program at a local community college; shortly after starting, I changed to a 4-year program. As with most community colleges, it is a working-class college: not a state university, nor a private college. Classes are scheduled for working people. While working toward a bachelor's degree, I took part-time employment as an adult recruiter for



the Girl Scouts of America; then, in 1994, I accepted a position as the director of a 9-county rural women's center. During these years I also tutored other undergraduate students in a variety of subjects. Additionally, I have been a volunteer activist/advocate for women's equal pay, women's reproductive rights, HIV/AIDS awareness, and mediation and conflict resolution. With support from my life partner and sons, I continued to work two part-time jobs and carry a full-time class schedule. I graduated magna cum laude in June of 1997.

Like many students who come to college later in life, I couldn't get enough knowledge. Hence, after 2 years into my Bachelor's degree, I decided I wanted a Master's degree. My life-partner had recently returned to graduate school after 23 years of industry work and encouraged me to continue my education, suggesting that I think about a doctorate as well. My sons and family were also supportive of this move. I began to look for someone at my college who would assist and advise me.

### **Melanie: Journey to Independence**

My life began in the early fifties outside a small town in rural Pennsylvania. My parents were very poor and had to struggle just to feed and clothe four children. My father only had an eighth grade education. He was the oldest in a large family and was sent at a very young age to live and help on the farm with of a childless aunt and uncle. My mother finished high school, but I vividly remember when I was a child that she told me that she wished she could have become an archeologist and searched for ancient civilizations. She sounded so wistful, as if she had lost something of great value.

My parents believed in the Protestant work ethic, that if a person worked hard he/she would be successful. So they both worked hard and were modestly successful. Meanwhile, I excelled in both elementary and high school. But, I also desperately wanted to escape what I felt was a life devoid of love and caring. My parents were hard-working, good people, but they never displayed affection for each other or for their children. I felt that something was missing and I looked for it in the wrong places. I fell "in love" at the age of 17 and in my senior year of high school decided that I didn't want to go to college.

Upon high school completion, I went to work as a clerk in a department store. I had worked since I was sixteen years old as a waitress in several restaurants and decided to try being a sales clerk. Women, even in the late sixties, were still conditioned to think that they could, or should, only work in certain occupations (i.e., waitress, sales clerk, beautician; or, if college educated, as teachers or nurses). Besides, I was going to marry my high school sweetheart, so why would I need anything more than a salesclerk or waitress job? Within six months, I was pregnant, we married, and he quit school and enlisted in the Marines. Eight years later, after a tumultuous marriage and the birth of two more children, we divorced. I was a single parent and I had no training for a good job and was once again working as a waitress. I decided to give college a try. I enrolled at a local university, quit my waitress job, and went on the Welfare rolls.

I completed my bachelor's degree in business in two years and nine months. Just prior to my graduation, I met my second husband. He was an African-American and I fell madly in love, at least that's what I thought then. The marriage didn't last too long. Just like my first husband, he

became abusive - both verbally and at least once physically. Soon after graduation, I obtained a position teaching at a business school and discovered that I loved teaching. In college I had acquired a love of learning. I found that teaching, as my college adviser told me, is the "ultimate learning experience."

Once again I was a single parent, this time with four children, trying to survive financially and emotionally. I overdid it. I worked three jobs - full time teaching at a business school, part time weekends at a local convenience store, and delivering Sunday newspapers in the middle of the night on Saturday. I also took two night classes for an MBA. All this while I was raising four children alone. I crashed big time. I suffered a stress-related breakdown. I couldn't stay on that treadmill any longer. Subsequently, I took a position with the state as a budget analyst. Three years later I transferred to a state university as a management analyst. While employed at this university, I earned a master's degree. I began teaching as an adjunct professor at a small women's college, because I longed to return to the classroom. For me teaching has been a highly rewarding occupation. As an adjunct, I made connections that resulted in an offer for a position as Director of a Bachelor's Completion Program at this women's college. I decided that it was time to pursue my lifelong dream of earning my doctorate. Based on my experiences with adult learners, I chose to pursue a degree in adult education.

### **Analysis**

There are several significant areas of convergence in our stories of traversing undergraduate school. For example, we all combined work and family responsibilities with studies while attaining our degrees; we all have farming in our backgrounds; and we all taught or provided training in previous work environments. Additionally, we all previously thought of college as a pathway to a better job and upward mobility; we all came to recognize our intelligence through our undergraduate experience; we all lean toward a feminist and Marxist viewpoint; and we have moved cautiously toward graduate school.

However, we also have divergent areas in our histories that make each of our stories unique. For example, we all have different marital experiences, we all began our degree-seeking experiences at different times in our lives, and we all took different paths and timeframes toward our degree attainment. Additionally, while our parents were lifelong partners, Sue's family led a more nomadic lifestyle, while Gaye's was location-bound and Melanie's was somewhere in-between. These differences are reflected in the choice of undergraduate school each of us made. Another difference was the motivation for going to college: for Melanie, it was a result of being a single-parent and the need to better support a family; Sue went to college shortly after high school; and Gaye chose college after experiencing a combination of a "glass-ceiling" effect at work and the "empty-nest" syndrome.

### **Our Working Class Perceptions of Work**

Through our discussions, we have come to some agreement of what our working class values have taught us about work: Work is physical labor - punching a time clock; it is regimented and closely supervised; it has specific tasks, little variation and requires little imagination or decision-making; and work is **not** critical thinking, reflection, journaling, research or reading

books. While some of our families have supported our decisions to attend graduate school, they still ask, "What kind of job can you get with this degree?" "When will you be getting a job?" and "When will you go back to work?" As Susan noted, "it didn't make sense to them that someone with a family (or without one for that matter) would quit a decent job to go to school - to sit around and read books!" When our families refer to work and job, they are still thinking in the working class paradigm. Meanwhile, we are trying to crossover into a different paradigm that says reading, research, writing and thinking are work, albeit intellectual work.

## **Becoming an Academic**

### **Susan: Learning to be an 'Academic'**

In truth, graduate school has been absolutely wonderful and horrible at the same time. My husband and I (as well as our children) are no longer the family norm on either side of our families. We talk differently, spend our time differently, and are now pursuing careers as opposed to jobs. I am the only 'working mother' on either side of our families. While, they are generally supportive, there are occasional times filled with friction. For example, during hay-baling season at the farm - it simply isn't acceptable to not work the required 12-hour days at the farm. Studying isn't considered serious work. Also, being in school or working makes it difficult to schedule and participate in the 'women's work' in our family of preserving vegetables, cooking meals for company, and so on.

Within school, I am sometimes torn as to what my role is. For a long time, I felt uncomfortable asking department secretaries to process paperwork or assist me - I felt more like one of them than I did a student. On the other hand, the perspective makes it easier for me to develop relationships with people whom I value very much. Another thing I've noticed is that I have developed a perfectionist streak that is simply out of proportion to what is necessary - I work doubly hard to see that my work is taken seriously.

I often feel like an 'Impostor' - I describe this as a kid playing dress-up. This is especially noticeable to me when I teach, present, or attend "official" meetings. In addition, I don't always know how to negotiate social conversations on campus - many of the faculty simply live in a different, more affluent world. In reality, our student loan debt and attitudes are so different that I feel like an "outsider." This isn't always bad, nor is it always on my mind, but it does crop up from time to time.

I find that I tend to bond with staff, janitors, and other more working class men and women at the university. I also hesitate before I share my background with other academics - I have to gauge their reactions before I share personal information about myself. Generally speaking - I think that I've had a positive experience. I think the university culture doesn't accept or support working class academics and this tension has both professional and personal advantages and disadvantages. Overall, I believe my background enhances my work - I have a lot of experience to draw upon; although, I sometimes struggle with the social capital required to navigate the system.

I just returned from an academic conference, and I still notice that at times I feel like a kid playing dress-up - as if my role at the conference is somehow different than the other participants. I'm not sure if and when this will ever go away. It is difficult to undo nearly 40 years of lifestyle!

## **Gaye: Traveling the Knowledge Pathway**

Throughout my undergraduate degree, my advisor (a woman my age) provided encouragement, except when I talked about graduate school. She once told me that getting a master's degree was a good idea and that I could do it while I worked full-time. However, I shouldn't consider a doctoral degree, because as an older working woman, I would never get the loans paid back before I retired (indicating to me that she didn't think I was intelligent enough to get financial help). When I chose Adult Education over Social Work, she refused to write a letter of recommendation for me for graduate school. However, this woman considered herself a feminist and a friend to other women. In feminist readings, I had encountered differences between my experiences as a working woman and the experiences of the writers, but I hadn't understood completely that this was about class until my college advisor made it personal. While she saw me as a working class woman who would work at a job for the rest of my life, I was beginning to see myself as a working-class woman who was becoming a career academic.

While encouragement from my advisor was not forthcoming, I did receive encouragement from other women, and many men teachers. One of them took me under his wing long enough to traverse the GRE, and begin the search for a graduate school. In graduate school, I have found men professors more in-tune to my working class ways of thinking and knowing. (Is this because many of the women professors are not of the working class?)

I was accepted into my graduate program in the fall of 1997. During the first year, I learned that the head of the department had interviewed many of the other students who started when I did, but I had not been interviewed. Additionally, I applied for a graduate assistantship (GA), but was refused for the first two years. However, during the summer of 1999, the department head contacted me. She asked if I would be interested in working for her as a GA on a conference that our university was hosting. I agreed. In a conversation with her at a later meeting, she revealed something that gave me an indication of how my working-class background was impacting my graduate experience. She noted that the undergraduate college I had attended to attain my degree was just a community college - a working class college. However, she now realized that I was a special case. (Was I special because of who I was, or because she had recently found out first-hand what I was capable of?)

With the encouragement of one professor (a man), during my first year I wrote a proposal for a paper that was accepted for a national conference. Additionally, I have been approached by several other professors (men) to write other pieces. While this seems to have been a generally positive experience, I find that the closer I get to my own dissertation research, the more I procrastinate on completing papers. The result is that I have begun to put myself under even more pressure to produce. Now it seems that something that was enjoyable has become a "job" that I must complete.

As I reflect upon the relationships I have developed since coming to graduate school, I find that I often feel more comfortable talking with the secretarial staff than with the professors. This is most especially true in my position as senior graduate assistant. I recognize that this is partly because of the collaborative nature of my position: I work for the same people as the program and department secretaries do. However, I also find that our lives have more similarities than with many of the faculty. Additionally, many of the women professors keep themselves distanced from me, although this may be related to their ideas about how professionals interact with non-professionals.

While I have committed to a career in the academic world, each semester I struggle with the "job" thing. I have found myself scanning the local paper for jobs (and finding fewer and fewer that interest me). In addition, I now have guaranteed funding as a Graduate Assistant, yet I still have these lapses in thinking I should be "working," even as I teach and work as a graduate assistant.

### **Melanie: An Intellectual Quest**

Prior to applying to graduate school, I asked myself several times whether I wanted to "do this to myself" - the enormous intellectual work, studying, writing, research, etc. - which I knew would need to be done to earn a doctorate. It would be entirely different from the secure, stable, well-paying job that I had. I still sometimes wonder what I am doing here!

In most of my classrooms, I feel isolated from the other students. I am a poor, underprivileged single parent, very different from my middle and upper class classmates. Most of my professors are also middle to upper class. While many of them are women, my working class roots seem to create a barrier between us. If I were earning my degree in a field other than adult education, with a minor in women's studies, my professors might not be as understanding of my "life situation" as a single parent when it interferes with my intellectual work.

In my second year of study, I was awarded a departmental fellowship of approximately \$11,000 with no teaching or research requirements attached, but with which I would need to pay my tuition for the year. When I also accepted a graduate student wage-payroll position to supplement this "income," the female head of my department commented, "You must really be rolling in money now!" She did not seem to remember that I had two children to support even though she had met them several times!

I seem to be able to relate better with the non-academics at the university, the clerical, maintenance and cleaning staff I come into contact with on campus than with the academics. I can talk with them about their families and their lives because their experiences are similar to my family and my life. I have won the admiration of some of them, simply because I can talk to them in their "language" as well as interact with the intellectuals in the academic professional's "language."

Due to the demands of my working class life, my second year of my doctoral program became more and more difficult. It was hard to find the time to complete assignments, but I found to my amazement that I could complete papers in just a few hours and receive "A's" on them. I began to

feel as if I did not deserve the "A's" I was receiving and that it would not be long before someone discovered my fraudulence. It just did not seem as if I was putting enough "work" into the "A's" I was receiving.

Even though my parents are very proud of me and of what I am doing (earning a doctorate), they are afraid of the changes that may occur as I become an academic. My father once stated, "When you get your doctorate, you won't 'know' us." He is afraid of losing me. He is also constantly trying to find me a job - showing me ads in the newspaper and telling me of employment signs he has seen. He seems to have this need for me to "work." I also find myself perusing the want ads even though I have a part-time job and it makes absolutely no sense for me to get a full-time job because that would add years to the time it will take to complete my degree.

I also have to explain repeatedly to my family all the steps I still have to complete before I finish my doctorate - comprehensive exams, research proposal, the research itself, and writing the dissertation. It is an entirely different world to them, because they believe that once you finish all your courses and get your grades, you should receive your degree.

### **Analysis**

Clearly, the quest plot that Hartman describes has a different spin on it for us as working class women academics. For example, the quest plot for us may include a continued dedication to children and a spouse, as well as having to reconcile our working class values about what work is while fulfilling the proscribed goals of knowledge and authority. It seems likely then that when we begin the journey toward the profession plot, one that is even more proscribed than the quest plot, we will have to redefine ourselves again.

We can see the impostor phenomenon working in our academic lives. Our working class roots prepare us to "do." Yet, our academic careers prepare us to "know." For example, our family and friends ask, "What kind of job will you be able to get when you graduate?" However, at a recent conference, we were asked, "What is your research interest?" We deal with this dichotomy in our lives daily.

Another area that relates to how we define ourselves is in our relationships with other academics. While two of us are interested in feminist theory, which would indicate a gender-related orientation in our academic relationships, all of us have mentors who are men. However, while we could attribute our mentor relationships, in part to our specific research interests, we do have interests in women's issues, suggesting that other women would have an interest in mentoring us through our doctoral quest, if they were available to us.

We all note our feelings of closeness to other working class peoples in the university, such as the maintenance, janitorial and secretarial staff, but feel reticent when sharing our lives with faculty - our future colleagues. We sometimes wonder when they will find out that we are not who they think we are. Additionally, some of us have a tendency to over-prepare, to be perfectionist, while others of us "procrastinate and finish in a flurry" (Clance, et al., [1995](#), p. 80). In both cases, there is a fear of someone recognizing our impostor status. In addition, we relate the actions of

perfectionism and procrastination to our embedded working class values of what work should be. In other words, it feels more like the old definitions of work if it is difficult and not as enjoyable.

## Discussion

Research and study are the work of a career academic, which seems antithetical to our previous comments about what "work" is. However, as we deal with our impostor feelings, we have come to appreciate our working class values as they apply to our new careers in the academe. While we still struggle with our perceptions regarding academic work, we are beginning to recognize that what we are doing is "work." We are overcoming impostor feelings by integrating who we are with who we are becoming. For example, we have stopped looking for "jobs" and have begun looking for career positions that fulfill our research agendas: lifework rather than work for life.

As feminists we expected that gender inequality would be our overwhelming issue in graduate school, as it had been for us in undergraduate school. However, while there are some gender issues that relate to graduate experiences, class issues have come to dominate our graduate school experience. Ironically, the dominance of class inequality has led us to form alliances with working class men professors as often, or more often than with women professors of all class groups. One could attribute this phenomenon to men looking for professional relationships where they can dominate or feel less competitive. However, it is unlikely that we would allow such relationships to continue given our strong feminist perspectives.

While this may seem antithetical to feminist theory, it makes sense within the context of the impostor phenomenon. Additionally, Bourdieu (1986) notes that social capital is found within class structures. As working class women academics, we have social capital within our class, which explains our alliances with working class men academics. However, we have had difficulty establishing the social interaction, networks and social trust that Putnam (1993) says are the elements needed for self-reliance in a community - in this case, the academic community, because of the class structure within the academe.

## Conclusion

Currently, there is little research concerning issues of class in the academe. We hope this study contributes to the understanding of class issues in the university community. As a result of our recognition of class as the dominant theme of our graduate school experience, we have decided to extend this research. We next wish to interview three working class women of color to include their stories among our own, to further test the impostor phenomenon and to determine if issues of class override issues of gender for women of other cultures within the graduate academe. Future research may also include graduate students at other universities.

We continue to struggle against feeling like impostors: too often feeling like strangers in a strange land. However, all three of us have agreed that we have started overcoming this phenomenon. We have come to recognize that we are not so much impostors as outsiders in an academic world of white, upper-class male dominance. As we break the spell of the phenomenon and integrate our working class selves in our new environment, we risk further alienation from

those women who have chosen to remain impostors. We have learned to appreciate and respect our outsider status and to view it as a source of strength as we enter the *Scared Grove*.

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