

Poetic Narratives: Midcareer Women Recognizing Their Worth, Overcoming Impostership and Navigating to Wellness

Michelle Glowacki-Dudka¹ 

Amy Baize-Ward² 

Guest edited by Alan Bainbridge, Laura Formenti, Ewa Kurantowicz

We have no known conflict of interest to disclose. We thank the participants in this study for their insights and contributions. We also thank Colette Kramer for her work as the graduate assistant in support of this research project.

Abstract

This qualitative research study describes midcareer women, 40–55 years old, who are educators and leaders in their organizations. The twelve participants shared data through journaling, focus groups, and interviews. We asked them to define wellness and success in their lives. We also sought to understand how they recognized issues of impostership, patriarchy, backlash, and oppression in their personal and professional experiences. As midcareer women, they shared strategies to navigate or address these issues, so that they could achieve a sense of wellness and success in their lives. We used a post-structural feminist theory to recognize the value and worth of their work within a system of power and social relations that are continuously renegotiated. We shared the data from our study through a collective narrative poem developed from the participant transcripts.

The narrative poem *Not an Imposter in the Mirror* collected quotes and statements from the interview transcripts and organized them into the themes of impostor phenomenon, cultural backlash, and patriarchy, and then strategies

¹ Teachers College, Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana, USA, mdudka@bsu.edu, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4614-8727>

² Ivy Tech Community College, Muncie, Indiana, USA, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1322-0734>

to navigate and find hope. They continue the challenge to cope within, to work outside, and to make their voices heard.

Biographical research and poetry provided ways to honor the women's experiences. Women's work has value and while impostor phenomenon is real, they can overcome it by sharing their feelings and supporting others through mentoring and modeling leadership.

Keywords

Impostorship, poetic narrative, feminist economic theory, backlash, patriarchy, women

"Risk - risk anything. Care no more for the opinion of others, for those voices. Do the thing hardest on earth for you to do. Act for yourself. Face the truth" (Mansfield, 1922, p. 333).

Introduction

Marilyn Waring (1988) noted in her tome, *If Women Counted: A New Feminist Economics*, that many of the things that are valued in daily life, such as clean water, air, national parks, beaches, forests, or a pollution-free environment, counted for nothing in the economic systems of public or private expenditures or gross domestic capital. She also recognized that with the invisible value of the environment was the "invisibility of women and women's work" (p. 2). She explained that the economic interests determined by men who run First World governments, multinational banks, and multilateral agencies "are only interested in seeing the *cash generating* capacity of debtor countries, not their *productive capacity*" (italics in original, p. 3).

This perspective places no value on issues of peace, preservation of the environment, and the invisible unpaid labor undertaken by women and children. These aspects of life are taken for granted and do not hold value in the traditional system of economics driven by governments and gross domestic product (GDP). The division of paid (worthy) labor and unpaid (worthless) labor is ingrained in the systems of economics that determine what counts as a contribution in the world. From this standard, women's contribution of care and service hold little value (Warring, 1988). Yet, this is changing.

For women in both paid and unpaid work, many experience feelings of impostorship, backlash, patriarchy, and oppression. These feelings and experiences are real and common (Calhoun, 2020). As women seek to balance their professional, personal, and educational responsibilities, the anxiety and self-doubt as to women's expectations are heightened (Kashen, 2020). Even as women gain more visible and powerful positions, they often feel as though they are not

worthy of being in these positions or see themselves as frauds waiting to be found out (Clance & Imes, 1978; Bravata et al., 2020).

Literature Review

This study explored how midcareer women related to impostor phenomenon, patriarchy, backlash, and oppression as they sought to find value, hope, and meaning in their professional and personal lives. The concepts of midcareer women, impostor phenomenon, patriarchy, backlash, and feminism are explored in this brief literature review.

Midcareer Women

The time of midlife for women can be full of transitions and challenges to find a new role and purpose. Women in midlife have life achievements that are meaningful and a wealth of knowledge and expertise. They often feel free to gain “their own voice and a newfound sense of freedom to express their feelings and share their knowledge. . . . Further, each of the participants felt that they had knowledge that was worth of sharing with others” (Degges-White, 2001, p. 8). They are often in the strongest part of their career, mature enough to be the expert in their profession, giving back by mentoring and networking with others, and not ready to retire yet. This stage of life was termed ‘Generativity’ by Erikson (1950). It is defined as “the concern in establishing and guiding the next generation” (p. 267), the drive to create something that outlives themselves.

The psychologist Erikson (1950) researched the life stages of women, and he found a relationship between social project commitment and the personality development themes of identity, intimacy, and generativity in women’s middle years. Women who prioritized both a career and family had heightened both identity themes and generativity themes (Newton & Stewart, 2010).

Midcareer women also have a high level of emotional intelligence and can make meaning of their experiences through multiple lenses (Reynolds, 2010). We also recognized that some women aged 40–55 years old may not feel as though their experiences are valued or are meaningful enough to share with others. Many women have suffered within the confines of social expectations or have been punished for moving beyond or outside of the roles generally expected of women (Calhoun, 2020).

Impostor Phenomenon

Impostor phenomenon was originally defined by Clance and Imes in 1978 as a high-achieving individual that feels like a fraud and thus attributes success to

external factors and are unable to internalize success (Clance & Imes, 1978). This phenomenon has been discussed, related, and researched by many who work in psychology, education, and leadership and has become a popular topic for current research studies and lay literature, especially that focused on women or marginalized groups. More than sixty studies have been conducted and reported within peer-reviewed articles from 1969 to 2018, with half published since 2012 (Bravata et al., 2020). While impostor syndrome is not a recognized psychiatric disorder or clinical diagnosis, it is often framed as something to address in the popular self-help culture or lay literature. Examples of impostor phenomenon or impostor syndrome can be found across the professions, in many roles, and with multiple populations (Bravata et al., 2020).

Owen (2020) presented a detailed explanation for developing one's own capacity for leadership and understanding one's leadership identity. In that line of thinking, she cited literature on the concept of leadership efficacy, "the belief that one can be successful in leadership" (p. 53). Women often score less than men on efficacy for leadership, while having higher scores for leadership capacity. Barriers to self-efficacy in leadership include "perfectionism, the need to please, and the belief that one will be revealed as less than capable or as a fraud (impostor syndrome)" (p. 53).

Patriarchy

Patriarchy is defined as "a system where men dominate because power and authority are in the hands of adult men" (Shaw & Lee, 2007, p. 4). Because the systems and structures of the Western world in general and the US in particular are established to privilege white men, women and people of color are relegated to roles of service or seek ways to gain access to power (Newton & Stewart, 2010). The patriarchal system shapes how men and women think about the world and their place in it, as well as the relationships with each other and with social institutions and employment. In most cases, women's roles and positions are still far behind men in pay equity and status and are biased against the perceived skills of women (Regine, 2010; Owen, 2020).

Owen (2020) reminded us that just because some women are empowered does not mean patriarchy is dead, it just means some are lucky. Often women are undervalued or taken for granted as they contribute to society, work, and even families. They also are most likely to lose employment during downward economic cycles, especially Black and LatinX women, such as with the pandemic (Kashen, 2020).

Patriarchy abounds and has an influence of all aspects of life. Most workplaces are set up to serve men and fit their schedules, with the assumption that there is a caregiver at home who will undertake the daily tasks of living, so the men

can concentrate on their work. Any threat to the patriarchy is quickly rebuked through backlash and at times, violence (Regine, 2010).

As women make progress in the workforce and positions of power, they are often discouraged from applying for or taking roles developed for white able-bodied men. The use of impostership or demand for perfection are tools to force them out. Yet, patriarchy also holds its reign through more direct approaches as well. For example, in 2008, the Center for Work-Life Policy found that 52% of women aged 35–40 left their jobs in sciences and technology due to a “macho culture where women are perceived as simply not being as good in math and science as men” (Regine, 2010, p. 62). The culture led to sexual harassment, lack of mentors, dismissive attitudes, and “predatory and demeaning and discriminatory stuff” (p. 62).

In order to keep women in their place, patriarchal assumptions of who can be a leader and what a leader looks like persist. By imposing unattainable expectations on women who seek to enter spaces traditionally held by men, women may self-censor or feel like an impostor and outsider (Gibson-Beverly & Schwartz, 2008). The patriarchal pressure embraces that feeling of weakness and lack of courage to keep outsiders, marginalized people, and others who seek change out of positions of power.

Backlash

The patriarchal society protects itself in a variety of ways. When women or marginalized groups make too much progress, or even just perceived progress towards attaining equal rights or gaining status, the government, media, and other groups of social control in society mobilize to stop the motion. Susan Faludi documents how this occurred against the Equal Rights Amendment and the feminist movement’s gains in the 1970s in her book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991). Backlash can occur across society as well as for individuals who seek to make changes in the workplace or a social setting. This occurs through shaming, silencing, firing, harassment, and violence (Regine, 2010).

Third Wave Feminism

Feminism seeks to shift the power in the world from patriarchy that primarily benefits white males and works to “end sexist oppression. Its aim is not to benefit any special group of women, any particular race and class of women. It does not privilege women over men. It has the power to transform all of our lives” (hooks, 2000, p. viii). The third wave of feminism (approximately 1980s–2010s) and feminist economics served as a call to action for women who recognize that our

world has been structured in order for women to serve men's exploits of the natural and social world (Warring, 1988). It also developed understandings that women experience a layered identity with multiple intersecting oppressions (Crenshaw, 1989). The internet made the women's movement more global, and they sought to expand alliances with all women from diverse racial and cultural identities.

Warring (1988), who was located in Australia, proclaimed a call to action for women who recognize that our world has been structured in order for women to serve men's exploits of the natural and social world. She presented a feminist economic framework and petitioned the government for a rethinking of the core values to recognize women's work and also the natural environment.

Approximately the same time in the US, bell hooks (1984) proposed a feminist economics "re-thinking the nature of work" (p. 102). She felt that in order for women to recognize that, "it would be a significant and meaningful gesture of power and resistance for women to learn to value the work they do, whether paid or unpaid" (p. 103). Yet, many women who see themselves as feminists have not recognized the intersectional issues of race and class within the feminist economic argument (hooks, 1984).

Gloria Steinem (1994) also addressed the fact that women across the world and in the US live "low on capital, low on technology, and labor intensive – not to mention the world's biggest source of free or cheap labor, plus its means of reproduction" (p. 201). She recognized the power that women could gather from seeing class in a way that can value and support each other's work:

Therefore it's in the interest of women at both ends of the spectrum to consider class as women experience it, not as women have been taught it—to see the ways it disguised and preserves a deeper system of sexual caste, and to explore how we might pool strengths and support one another for mutual benefit. (p. 188)

Purpose of the Study

This research project sought to understand how midcareer women, aged 40–55, defined wellness and success in their lives. We also sought to understand how they recognized issues of impostership, patriarchy, backlash, and oppression in their lives, and how these factors were related to their personal and professional experiences. We had them describe, as midcareer women, how they learned to navigate or address these issues, so that they could achieve a sense of wellness and success in their lives. As the women shared their stories, they related their

perceptions of the value of their work and how that shaped the perceptions of themselves. Learning from their experiences can provide hope and show how to navigate their own situations.

Conceptual Framework

A poststructuralist feminist approach guided this qualitative research study. Hayes and Flannery (2000) provided an overview of the various types of feminist theories that relate to aspects of women's experience and learning opportunities. Psychological feminist theories, such as those in *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky et al., 1986) position women into the existing social order when men are dominant. While it "challenges women's invisibility and marginalization of women's experience in knowledge building process" (Hayes & Flannery, 2000, p. 11), it does not address the social structures that keep men in power. Structural feminist theories focus on reproduction of power relationships and explain how patriarchy and capitalism affect women's status and experience in workplaces, classrooms, and families. Yet these theories do not acknowledge the personal power or individual free will and can devalue women's intellectual abilities.

The study uses a poststructuralist feminist theory that combines aspects of personal power along with structural issues to recognize that "each of us is at once oppressed and privileged and how this experience continually changes according to the structures in which we find ourselves" (Hayes & Flannery, 2000, p. 13). We used poststructuralist feminism to conceptualize gender as one aspect of identity within a system of social relations that are continuously renegotiated daily and also more broadly in society. Through this inquiry, we sought to "make social forces that influence women's lives more visible" (Hayes & Flannery, 2000, p. 15).

In this study and framework, we recognized that systems of power intersect when addressing gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and others (Crenshaw, 1989; 2010). Each woman's culture and background shapes how she attends to individual resistance and agency (Zwier & Grant, 2014). This looks different in accordance with each participant's unique experience of oppression.

Method

Research Design Overview

For this study, we used biographical narratives for women to explore the way midcareer women made sense of and navigated through feelings of impostership and the patriarchal barriers to their own success. Biographical research is an

approach to research that honors women's experience while is also part of a larger ecosystem of communities that can sustain or destroy hope. Biographical research provides the opportunity for "building meaningful dialogue and experience of togetherness, across difference" (ESREA 2021, n. p.). Through listening to and telling stories, we as researchers can "celebrate the complexity, messiness, ecological challenge, but also rich potential of living learning lives. . . Biographical research offers insights, and even signposts, to understand and transcend the darkness of the human condition" (ESREA 2021, n. p.). From their own experiences and narratives, we can better understand and support other women and marginalized people as they also seek new opportunities and find themselves in leadership positions to make change in the world.

This study brought together post structural feminist approaches, biographical research, and poetic narrative to produce a collective poem that encapsulated key ideas from the participants.

Poetic Narrative Approach

One of the co-authors of this paper constructed the narrative poem to make sense of the stories shared and developed the collective voice for the participants. She followed the methods presented by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), Hanauer (2010), and Faulkner (2009).

Hanauer (2010) expressed that poetry writing involves an intentional action toward personal discovery. This type of process triggers learning and understanding of the personal experience and allows for revisiting and interpretation. Faulkner (2009) shared that narratives of self-reflection can be messy because multiple voices contribute. Poetry allows a space for no one interpretation to stand out more than another. Faulkner (2009) continued by stating,

The researcher can use phrases from interviewees anywhere in the transcript and juxtapose them as long as they were the interviewee's words and enough words were presented to mirror the participant's rhythm and way of speaking. By reading and re-reading the interview transcripts, and at the end themes that described different aspects of the interviewee's life are used, poetry can be created and shared. (p. 31)

Additionally, Faulkner (2009) acknowledged that research poetry is designed to experience connection with participants through an emotional response. The underlying idea is that readers and listeners, although not experiencing the same phenomenon, can share the experience through an emotional connection with the descriptions and depictions displayed in poetry. Hanauer (2010) continued the conversation by stating,

Poetry writing is a process in which participants attempt to make sense of their own experiences and express them in a way that other readers may have an insight into their own subjective interpretation of personally meaningful events. Powerful emotions and real-world events form an impetus for poetry writing and, through the different revisions of the poem, its meaning and the meaning of the events addressed slowly emerge. As such, a poem is qualitative data which presents personal events and the specific ways in which the writer understands and feels their significance. It is this aspect of poetry writing that makes it a valuable tool for qualitative research. The poem is not an immediate response, but rather a deliberative personally meaningful interpretation of portrayed events. (p. 31)

A good poem, according to Faulkner (2009), is like the development of love and understanding. It starts in your gut; you fall in love with it, then you start to care how it's made and what outcomes the readers take away. The poem created should connect to the issue and should make the listener or reader feel emotions such as anger, joy, and hope. Hanauer (2010) shared that the writing process of poetry is a form of inquiry in which meanings of personal experiences are discovered during the process. Academic writing is point driven while the process of writing poetry is reflective and suggests a process of self-discovery through the writing itself.

When creating research poetry, an interpretation of the interviews occurs in order to tell a powerful version of experiences communicated. Faulkner (2009) shared that the writer uses punctuation as desired for outcome, uses recurring lines to create continuity, and allows freedom in design for feelings to emerge. As the interviewees' words were read and reread for themes, there was a desire to seek out the "essence conveyed, hues, and textures" (Faulkner, 2009, p. 134).

A narrative poem, according to Faulkner (2009), allows for storytelling from collective interviews and represents actual experiences that create distance between self and others but that blurs thoughts, while allowing everyone to feel episodes, epiphanies, misfortunes, or pleasures. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) described a link between the researcher who hears and recounts the story with the participant who tells the story, making it possible to advocate for social change and shift social and cultural narratives.

While reflecting on the themes of discourse, dialogue, and diversity related to the impostor phenomenon, the content of the shared stories exposed many common themes. So as not to state and restate the views in multiple ways, and after reviewing transcripts, themed data, and emotions, strategies of overcoming and working through the impostor phenomenon started to resonate. To add

depth to the poems, it was decided that there would be no “he said” or “she said” but words, phrases, and questions would be pulled directly from the transcripts to expose their journey and stories. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) expressed that weaving multiple accounts together produces a rich textured account of stories told and emotion shared.

Research Sample

The midcareer women in the study were invited to participate through a purposive sampling process. Women connected to the university or local community in the Midwestern US who met specific criteria of being aged between 40 and 55, having at least one child, having a professional position of leadership or teaching, and having at least a graduate degree were invited to participate. Of those fifteen invited, twelve women participated in the full scope of the study. More detail is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: *Information about the Participants.*

Pseudonym	Age	Children	Ethnicity	Professional Role
Kim	47	Daughter	White	Lecturer
Anna	48	Daughter and son	Mexican American	Tech Consultant & Adjunct Faculty
Dagny	40	3 sons	White	Mom, Dissertation Faculty
Esther	44	Daughter and son	White	Wellness Coordinator
Beth	55	Daughter and son	White	University Instructor
Hope	50	2 sons	White	Educational Executive
Diana	49	Daughter and son	White	Marketing Professional
Surely	45	Daughter	African American	CEO of Community Organization
Joy	48	Daughter and son	African American	Higher Ed. Administrator
Lola	48	Daughter	White	Professor

Harriet	49	2 daughters and son	White	Administer and Writer
Susan	48	Daughter and son	White	Associate Professor

Intersectionality was present in the stories as the women's experiences could not be separated from their racial and ethnic backgrounds, nor from their professional roles. All of the women were well educated and there were many who had completed terminal degrees. They came from nonprofit service organizations, a public university, and a community college within one mid-sized community. The women held multiple roles. Professionally they were leaders, instructors, and administrators. During the course of the study four women changed or added roles. They were also parents, community leaders, and some were continuing their graduate education.

Each participant selected a pseudonym for confidentiality which was used on nametags and for all data collection. The Human Subject Board and IRB process approved the study, and all participants signed consent forms.

Data Collection

The first set of data was collected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. For this qualitative research study, we used multiple sources of evidence in order to create a complex understanding of the women's experiences.

This study was conducted in three parts: a preliminary reflection stage, a focus group stage, and a follow-up interview stage. The study was made more trustworthy by the decision to examine and triangulate multiple sources of data related to the topic (Yin, 2011). First, participants were asked to reflect on the following words through journaling over eight weeks: wellness, success, impostor phenomenon, patriarchy, backlash, and oppression (November and December 2019). To protect participants' privacy, journals were not collected. In January 2020, three focus groups were conducted with participants sharing thoughts from their journals and other ideas related to impostor phenomenon in their personal and professional lives. Then in February 2020, follow-up interviews were conducted with one or two participants and the researcher or another 'participant interviewer' to go more deeply into the discussion and talk about strategies for overcoming and navigating through their feelings and experiences. More than 1300 minutes of interview data was collected and transcribed.

Data Analysis

Data was transcribed using online service providers that use artificial intelligence and people to transcribe audio recordings to text. These interview transcripts were cleaned up and then reviewed by the co-researchers. As this research used a collaborative approach, the participants had access to the data and five of them contributed to the initial coding of the transcripts. A priori codes were set based on the key words of the study. Then open coding was also used to let other themes emerge from the data. As this is a small qualitative study, it is not intended to be generalizable, but we seek to provide a glimpse into the lives and stories of the selected participants. The original data was coded into the a priori keywords of the study first. Then a second round of open coding was undertaken using a constant comparative method (Saldana, 2016). The data was sorted and categorized and sorted again as themes emerged. Both the open codes and the a priori codes and themes were reviewed and organized into an excel spreadsheet.

In order to develop the poetic narrative from the quotes, the researchers highlighted each theme and planned to group the poem stanzas by each of the themes that arose from the data. The stanzas came from direct quotes of the participants and collective thoughts within the key themes of impostership, oppression, backlash, patriarchy, reflection, wellness, advice, and strategies.

Poetry makes the invisible world visible, and can clarify as well as magnify experiences. Experiences shared can be interpreted via poetry (Faulkner, 2009). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) described the link between researcher and participant that makes it possible to advocate for social change and shift social and cultural narratives. Poetic narrative provides opportunities for the expressions of participants' impostor phenomenon, issues of privilege, patriarchy, and oppression to be woven into an expression of shared experiences. The use of poetic form provided anonymity for the individual participants, but still shared the emotion and context of their experiences. When writing the poem and combining the ideas, we identified the key emotions that began to resonate into a collective story for the participants.

Findings

Through this study, impostor phenomenon can be understood to be a coping mechanism for living as a woman in spaces that were created for and constructed by men. The participants from our study stated that the feeling of impostership "creeps up" on them. Each woman within the study talked about different descriptions, understandings, and positions within impostor phenomenon. After reviewing the transcripts from the focus groups and interviews, we found shared

themes. As we continued to review and categorize the codes, powerful statements related to backlash, oppression, and patriarchy emerged.

As we worked through how best to express what we were learning, it was determined that their powerful words needed to tell a powerful story, and poetry emerged. Faulkner (2015) described how poetry is a secret story that breaks down language and refines the things we say. It creates a singular, limitless, and powerful bond that speaks to senses, memories, and places. Hanauer (2010) expressed that poetry writing involves an intentional action toward personal discovery. Construction of the poem from the transcribed data provided the researchers an opportunity to bring shared themes into the poem, so that a collective voice is heard. The poem, written by one of the co-authors, is shared here as a representation of the collected findings. The co-author who brought this poem to life followed the methods presented by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), Hanauer (2010), and Faulkner (2009), as described above.

Not an Impostor in the Mirror

A look in the mirror and what is seen?
 A reflection of strength, courage, and love; a reflection of me.
 Truth or lie, which way do I lean?
 Oppression defeats me, backlash punishes me, patriarchy diminishes me.
 Am I an impostor?
 How do I navigate to the wellness I need?

What's under the surface, the genuine me.
 Nobody sees it. I feel like an impostor now.
 Motivation to rise to the top, so bogged down.
 Immediate gratification, new direction and writing it down.

What are you doing here, you don't belong.
 Just paddling like hell, so self-doubt and tears don't fall.
 Are these internal struggles or reflections of truth?
 What more can I do to be different and strong?
 Self-imposed expectations aren't holding me back.
 It's the lack of validation and harsh words or acts.

Do I belong here? Yes, of course I do.
 The conflicting messages, you're so much, too much.
 What to do with you?
 At last, invited to the table, but no time to focus on problems.
 Too busy defending and trying to change optics, so frustrating.
 The connections, relationships, projecting impostor.

Clawing up the ladder, but still no respect.
A double standard to support, ask, and react.

A look in the mirror and what is seen?
A reflection of strength, courage, and love; a reflection of me.
Truth or lie, which way do I lean?
Oppression defeats me, backlash punishes me, patriarchy diminishes me.
Am I an impostor?
How do I navigate to the wellness I need?

Fear of backlash, not speaking opinions.
My voice shuts down, no vote, work, or communication.
Are we living in “the art of war?”
Their weapon is our openness and genuine condition.
Shutting down our authenticity and strengths.
Sparks intimidation and lessens our leadership.

Paying for statements taken out of context weakens loyalty, faith, and trust.
Being honest and open, sharing one’s self.
Just used to tear, hurt, and hold you down.
Intimidation stops progress.

Nothing collaborative, encouraging, nurturing, or uplifting.
Feelings and emotions hidden, no room in the workplace.
Undermined, marked, passed over for promotion.
Affects all aspects of one’s life, the backlash oppresses.

A look in the mirror and what is seen?
A reflection of strength, courage, and love; a reflection of me.
Truth or lie, which way do I lean?
Oppression defeats me, backlash punishes me, patriarchy diminishes me.
Am I an impostor?
How do I navigate to the wellness I need?

Defining our experience an impostor is clear,
Sometimes it’s here and sometimes it’s there.
Fear of retribution, harassment, and dominating behaviors.
Take it as construction, turn the other cheek, don’t take it personally.
Invited yet excluded, navigation is confusing.

Being aggressive creates barriers, men are to succeed!
Not true. Hear the female voices, they are smart and capable.

Treatment of equals still slow to evolve, changes are needed.
Supporting the woman to get work exposed.
Impostor reduces and maybe goes away.
We are taught to submit, build relationships, and grow.
The cycle makes it difficult and the impostor arises.

A look in the mirror and what is seen?
A reflection of strength, courage, and love; a reflection of me.
Truth or lie, which way do I lean?
Oppression defeats me, backlash punishes me, patriarchy diminishes me.
Am I an impostor?
How do I navigate to the wellness I need?

How to proceed and how to move past impostor?
Learn to understand self, have a breakdown and cry.
Past affects the present and directs future navigation.
Reading, gardening, and holding the family together.
Being authentic, setting boundaries, and reflection.

We don't need people's approval, march to the drum you're beating.
Have courage and support each other, give each other grace.
Lead from servanthood, from calmness and strength.
Our faith is our basis, our songs are our release.
Journal, seek coaching, keep pushing toward the next goal.
All strategies lead to wellness and action.

A look in the mirror and what is seen?
A reflection of strength, courage, and love; a reflection of me.
Truth or lie, which way do I lean?
Oppression defeats me, backlash punishes me, patriarchy diminishes me.
Am I an impostor?
How do I navigate to the wellness I need?

Reading, walking, physical, and mental health.
Find your safe place and share in this community.
Set boundaries for balance and continue to give back.
Meditation, self-care, and a good wellness plan.

Be strong, brave, and kind.
Your instincts are great.
Impostor will happen, work through the steps.
You can and you will be successful.

A look in the mirror and what is seen?
A reflection of strength, courage, and love; a reflection of me.

Truth or lie, which way do I lean?
Oppression defeats me, backlash punishes me, patriarchy diminishes me.
I am NOT an impostor!
I can navigate the wellness I need.

Interpretation of the Poem

Through the women's collective stories and told through poetic narrative, we recognized the women as "active agents in resisting oppressive forces and shaping their own lives and learning" (Hayes & Flannery, 2000, p. 15). The narrative poem has on a powerful tone that leads the reader through the various components of the study before arriving at the wellness that is sought. The overarching meaning of the poem gives the reader an idea of the feelings and consequences that occur when impostership is felt. Ultimately it shared words of hope to be able to work through the experience. The poem described the participants' navigation of impostor phenomenon in their professional and personal lives, showing how they endured and providing hope for others.

The poem collected quotes and statements from the interview transcripts and organized them into the themes of impostor phenomenon, cultural backlash, and patriarchy, and then strategies to navigate and find hope. Impostor phenomenon is real to these women and while they have strategies to cope, it returns in new settings or uncomfortable positions. They continue the challenge to cope within, to work outside, and to make their voices heard.

The women participants in midcareer have accomplishments, but, at times, they still struggle to find their place and to change the culture of our world. Although many of these women were in positions of leadership, they were consistently undermined, paid less, and not heard on many topics of importance. Even if they were at the table, they still had to attend to the optics rather than focusing on the topics or problems to be solved. This used a lot of energy and diminished their feeling of effectiveness.

From the participants' own experiences and the collective narratives, we can better understand and support other women and marginalized people as they navigate systems of patriarchy, backlash, and their own feelings of impostership to seek new opportunities as leaders making change in the world. Through this study and in the development of these findings, the women found a community where they can connect and share their voice. They learned how to grow and move past the backlash and oppression. They learned what it takes to maintain their health and wellness; and through this study, they learned that they are not alone.

In the conclusions, we examined some of the key themes from this research and connected them to the lived experiences of the women. By articulating the interviews through poetry, the stories become more powerful.

Conclusions

When women reach midcareer, they have had many work experiences to reflect on and learn from. Through their own biographical story and in combination with others, a tapestry of knowledge is woven. Waring's work about the value of women's work continues to be relevant even as the world has changed considerably since 1988.

In 1988, the women who were interviewed were just coming into adulthood facing a future full of possibilities. This group of women were part of the third wave of feminism who integrated, redefined, and questioned old notions and social expectations of women hood, gender, class, and race. They were shaped new ideas about work, identity, and self-definition. They had more opportunities and were able to pursue a wide variety of education and professional roles. Yet, women still say that

They are afraid to say that they can't do it and afraid to say that they don't know how. No matter if it is a concept or a tangible object that is part of our universe, they [men] will colonize it with impunity. (Waring, 1988, p. 325).

Through this study, the women examined professional and personal experiences with work within systems of patriarchy. They reflected on their lives and shared how the experiences intersect with each part of their identity (Shaw & Lee, 2007). Even in midcareer, they still encountered patriarchy, backlash, and oppression for being women who sought to achieve their goals. The participants took risks, acted on their own behalf, and faced the truth of their own situations while sustaining hope for the future.

Their stories and passion for their work in the face of impostor phenomenon, patriarchy, and oppression demonstrate that they value their own work and the work of others. Using the poetic narratives to tell their stories provides a powerful tool to share with others. By seeing other people's stories and navigation strategies around and through feelings of impostership and insecurity, women can recognize their own stories and learn to push forward.

As we reflect on the statements that participants made within the interviews and that are represented within the poem, it is clear that oppression and patriarchy are still present in their lives. These women in midcareer and with accomplishments

to their names still struggle to find their place and to change the culture of our world. Women are still up against powerful forces as they work toward change and inclusion. From our research, the midcareer women shared that impostor phenomenon is still present and is real.

Recommendations

In 2018, the GDP still excluded the work of many women, especially those who did work in the home and volunteer work in the community. While there has been a push toward feminist and ecological economics, the world accounting systems still look at what is “productive” for consumption and ignore the work of the majority of women in their midst. “They were intentionally excluded. . . In all censuses and other data gathering instruments patriarchal construction continued” (Waring, 2018, p. 5).

There is hope that things are changing. For example, women are now the majority of college graduates and post-graduate students (Rhode, 2017) and they have gained faculty status and administrative roles. In the book *We Are The Leaders We’ve Been Waiting For* (2020), Julie Owen shared definitions of feminism that embraced theories of political, economic, and social equality of the sexes. She noted that notions of leadership are changing, with more attention being paid to authentic leadership, servant leadership, and relational, shared, and adaptive leadership, rather than focusing just on business and management models (Owen, 2020).

In order for women to stop feeling the pressure of impostor phenomenon, they need to recognize their own value and have others recognize their value as worthy contributors to society. Our research revealed that impostor phenomenon is present for these midcareer women when they enter workspaces and planning tables that have been built for and dominated by men. The discomfort that is palpable is a manipulative emotional tool to stop their participation or silence their voice. Even when at the planning table, one participant shared that she was worried about the optics of being present, rather than focusing on the issues being discussed. It serves to distract and devalue the women’s contribution if their presence is questioned and they feel like an imposter.

Sanford et al. (2015) shared that women of high achievement attribute their confidence to other strong women in leadership. While there is no solid solution to overcoming impostership, there is a recognized power within women to overcome patriarchy, backlash, and oppression. There is evidence and hope the women will claim their worth and work together to grow and lead the world. In

order to continue this push toward a feminist economic system where women and men have equal opportunities and access to power, educators and leaders can lead the way.

When women reach midcareer, they seek generativity and work to leave a legacy for their lives. Sanford et al. (2015) described characteristics of women in power who do not experience impostership. The women demonstrate confidence, set goals, seek out opportunities to serve in leadership positions, and have experience in their roles. They found that women could best resist impostor phenomenon by talking about their feelings with mentors, other women, and their romantic partners. 'Within these relationships, our participants found (a) the courage to try new things and (b) confirmation or comfort' (p. 40).

In order to model overcoming impostership and leading other women to recognize their own value, they can support others as they grow and gain positions of strength. They can continue to hold each other accountable, continue mentoring and networking to make stronger connections, and continue working and sharing journals about their experiences in order to recognize and overcome feelings of impostership and break free of the backlash and patriarchy. Women can navigate to the wellness they need.

If women are to be counted, they have to overcome and navigate through feelings of impostership and act as leaders to change the systems of power (Owen, 2020).

Waring's words from 1988 still are relevant today, so we end with her call to action that is so important to continue working toward even in 2021.

We women are visible and valuable to each other, and we must, now in our billions, proclaim that visibility and that worth. Our anger must be creatively directed for change. We must remember that true freedom is a world without fear. And if there is still confusion about who will achieve that, then we must each of us walk to a clear pool of water. Look *at* the water. It has value. Now look *into* the water. The woman we see there counts for something. She can help to change the world. (Waring, 1988, p. 326).

References

- Belenky, M. F., Clinchy, B. M., Goldberger, N. R., & Tarule, J. M. (1986). *Women's ways of knowing: The development of self, voice, and mind*. Basic Books.
- Bravata, D. M., Watts, S. A., Keefer, A. L., Madhusudhan, D. K., Tayler, K. T., Clark, D. M., Nelson, R. S., Cokley, K. O. and Hagg, H. K. (2020). Prevalence, predictors, and treatment of impostor syndrome: A systematic review. *J Gen Intern Med.* 35(4): 1252–1275. doi: 10.1007/s11606-019-05364-1

- Calhoun, A. (2020). *Why we can't sleep: Women's new midlife crisis*. Grove Press
- Clance, P. R., & Imes, S. A. (1978). The imposter phenomenon in high achieving women: Dynamics and therapeutic intervention. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice*, 15(3), 241–247. doi: 10.1037/h0086006
- Connelly, F. M. & Clandinin, D. J. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. Jossey-Bass.
- Crenshaw K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*.
- Crenshaw K. (2010). *Intersection of race and gender*; University of Wisconsin-Madison, Sociology Department FemSem. Madison, WI. 23 Oct 2010.
- Degges-White, S. (2001). Midlife transitions in women: Cultural and individual factors. *AdultSpan Journal* 13(1): 4-11. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-0029.2001.tb00100.x>
- ESREA (2021). An ecology of life and learning: Discourses, dialogue and diversity in biographical research. The annual conference of ESREA – European society for research on the education of adults. Life history and biography network. <https://lhbn2021.dsw.edu.pl/>
- Erikson, E. H. (1950). *Childhood and society*. Norton.
- Faulkner, S. L. (2009). *Poetry as method: Reporting research through verse*. Left Coast Press.
- Faulkner, W. (2015). *William Faulkner makes us wonder: What's so great about poetry, anyhow?* <https://npr.org/2015/04/30/402852491>
- Gibson-Beverly, G., & Schwartz, J. P. (2008). Attachment, entitlement, and the imposter phenomenon in female graduate students. *Journal of College Counseling*, 11(2), 119–132. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1882.2008.tb00029.x>
- Hanauer, D. (2010). *Poetry as research: Exploring second language poetry writing*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Hayes, E., & Flannery, D. D., (2000). *Women as learners: The significance of gender in adult learning*. The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series. Jossey-Bass.
- Hooks, b. (1984). *Feminist theory: From margin to center*. South End Press.
- Hooks, b. (2000). *Feminism is for everybody: Passionate politics*. Pluto Press.
- Kashen, J. (2020, October 30). How COVID-19 sent women's workforce progress backward. Retrieved November 4, 2020, from <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/women/reports/2020/10/30/492582/covid-19-sent-womens-workforce-progress-backward/>
- Mansfield, K. & In Murry, J. M. (1922/1954). *The journal of Katherine Mansfield*. Constable & Co.
- Newton, N. & Stewart A. J. (2010). The Middle Ages: Change in women's personalities and social roles. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*. 34(1): 75-84. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.2009.01543.x>
- Owen, J. E. (2020). *We are the leaders we've been waiting for: Women and leadership development in college*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Regine, B. (2010). *Iron butterflies: Women transforming themselves and the world*. Prometheus Books.

- Reynolds, M. (2010). *Wander woman: How high-achieving women find contentment and direction*. Berrett-Kohler Publishers, Inc.
- Rhode, D. L. (2017). *Women in leadership*. Oxford University Press.
- Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*, 3rd edition. Sage.
- Sanford, A. A., Ross, E. M., Blake, S. J. & Cambiano, R. L. (2015). Finding courage and confirmation: Resisting impostor feelings through relationships with mentors, romantic partners, and other women in leadership. *Advancing Women in Leadership*. 35, 31-41. <https://doi.org/10.18738/awl.v35i0.140>
- Shaw, S. M. & Lee J. (2007). *Women's voices, feminist visions: Classic and contemporary readings* (3rd ed.). McGraw Hill.
- Steinem, G. (1994). *Moving beyond words*. Simon & Schuster.
- Waring, M. (1988). *If women counted: A new feminist economics*. Harper & Row.
- Waring, M. (2018). *Still counting: Wellbeing, women's work and policy-making (BWB Text Book 73)*. Bridget Williams Books.
- Women in Academia: Quick Take. (2020, January 23). Retrieved February 2, 2021, from <https://www.catalyst.org/research/women-in-academia>
- Yin, R. K. (2011). *Qualitative research from start to finish*. Guilford.
- Zwier E., Grant C.A. (2014): Thinking intersectionally in education (in:) *Intersectionality and Urban Education. Identities, Policies, Spaces, and Power*; Carl A. Grant, Elisabeth Zwier (Ed.), Information Age Publishing.