



NERUPI

**What experiences of
impostorism among
racially minoritised
students can teach us
about capacity
building**

Dr Deborah Husbands
**University of
Westminster**



Background

- Long history of challenges in higher education for people from minoritised communities (Advance HE, 2019; Arday & Mirza, 2018)
- Hostile racial climate on campus: discrimination, insensitive comments, isolation, unbelonging (Hope, Hoggard, & Thomas, 2015; Stone et al., 2018)
- Increased reporting of impostorism in women (Bernard, Hoggard, & Neblett, 2018), African Americans (Cokely et al., 2013) & other racial and ethnic minorities (Peteet, Montgomery, & Weeks, 2015; Peteet, Brown et al., 2014)
- Harmful psychological consequences (McClain et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2007)
- Impairs academic performance (Walton & Cohen, 2007; Solórzano et al., 2000)
- Negative experiences can altogether intensify the feeling of being an impostor (McGee et al., 2021)

Research question: What role does the impostor phenomenon play in the perceptions, experiences and identities of Black female undergraduate students at UK institutions?

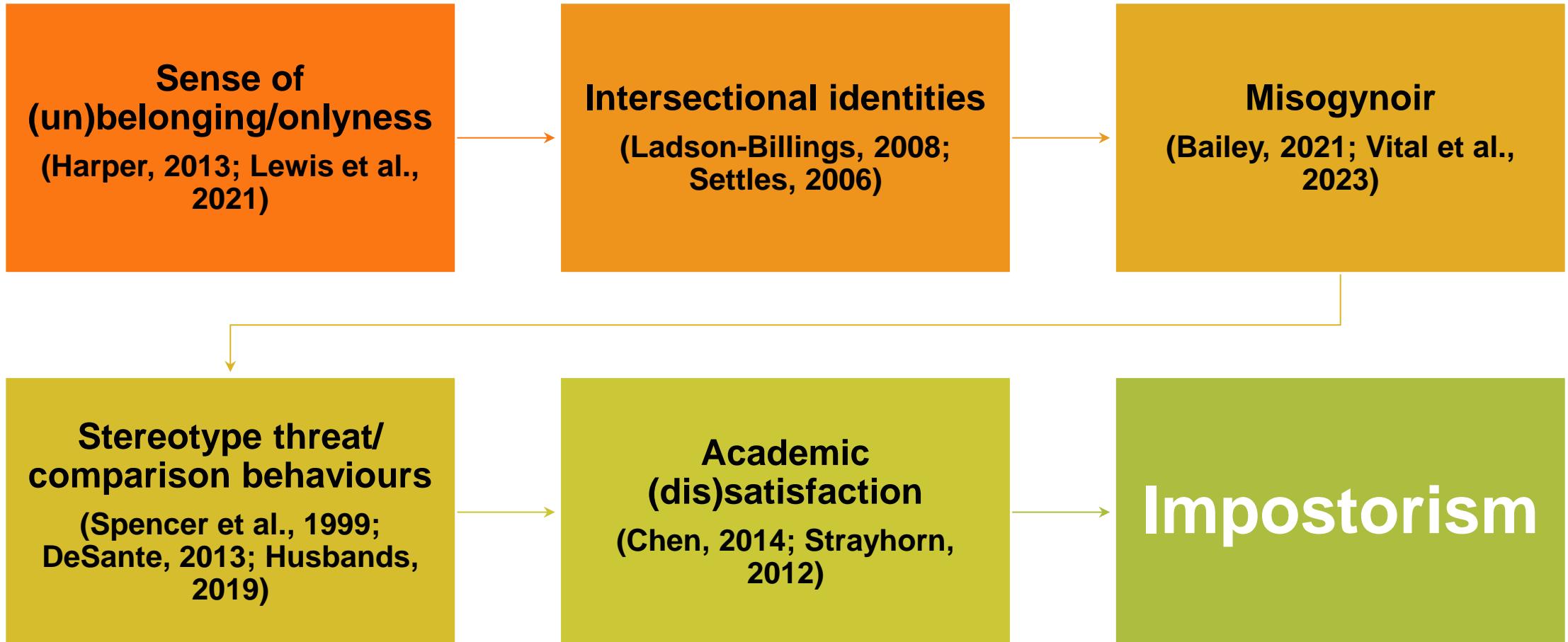
Participants

	Age	Ethnicity
1	19	Black
2	20	Black African
3	23	Black Caribbean
4	21	Black African
5	22	Black African/Indian
6	20	Black African
7	22	Black Hispanic
8	19	Black African
9	20	Black Caribbean
10	21	Black Caribbean

Method

- Purposive sampling (undergraduate students, self-identifying as Black ethnicity, female)
- Focus groups ($N = 4$) facilitated by Black women in higher education
- Semi-structured interviews (online)
- Inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)
- CAQDAS: NVivo & Quirkos

Theoretical Drivers for the Impostor Phenomenon



1. Contextual experiences of impostor phenomenon:

- school/high school - installation
 - university - maintenance/realisation/salvation
 - employment - actualisation

2. Finding sense of belonging:

- onlyness c/w psychological safety
 - comparison behaviours
- searching for culturally-sensitive support

Impostor phenomenon among racially minoritised students

3. Struggling to maintain and value an authentic self:

- intersectional identities
- sense of social responsibility
- 'strong Black woman' schema/trope
- misogynoir

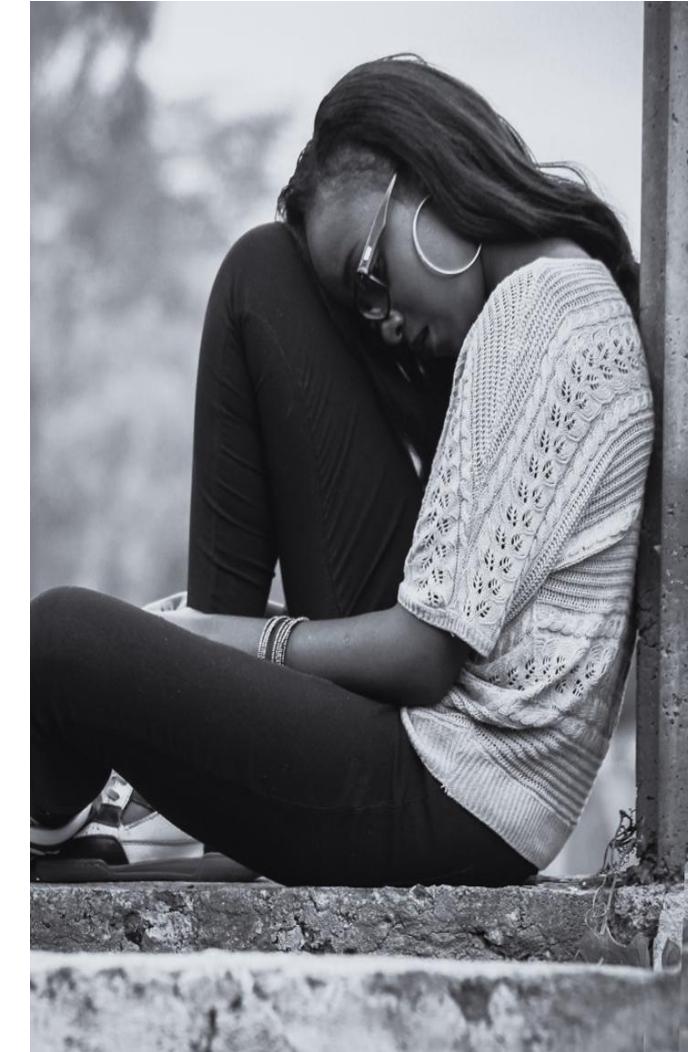
4. Taming my impostor:

- identity work as 'essentialness'
 - finding 'safe spaces'
 - self-talk as resilience

1. Contextual experiences of IP

Key features: three environments - secondary school, university (including placement) & employment

“Potentially, university saved the situation. I found out in first year, really, that I'm dyslexic. It took eighteen years for a teacher - one of my lecturers - to look at me and just went, oh, that might be because of this. But in secondary school and sixth-form it was just pegged off as, yeah, this is probably the best that you can do. And I would go to teachers and try to explain, no, I can do more!”



Building capacity

Proactively notice risk factors:

- **Structural factors**
 - Psychosocial climate linked to strategies, policies, charters, sense of community
 - Physical environment
 - Peer networks/friendships, student union/societies
- **Interpersonal factors**
 - Labelling behaviours
 - Student (dis)engagement (self/peer-to-peer)

Create opportunities for positive experiences:

- MWB support
- Caring personal tutors
- Career development
- Student empowerment (EDI champions, course reps, interns, etc)
- Working in partnership with staff (co-creation/co-production)



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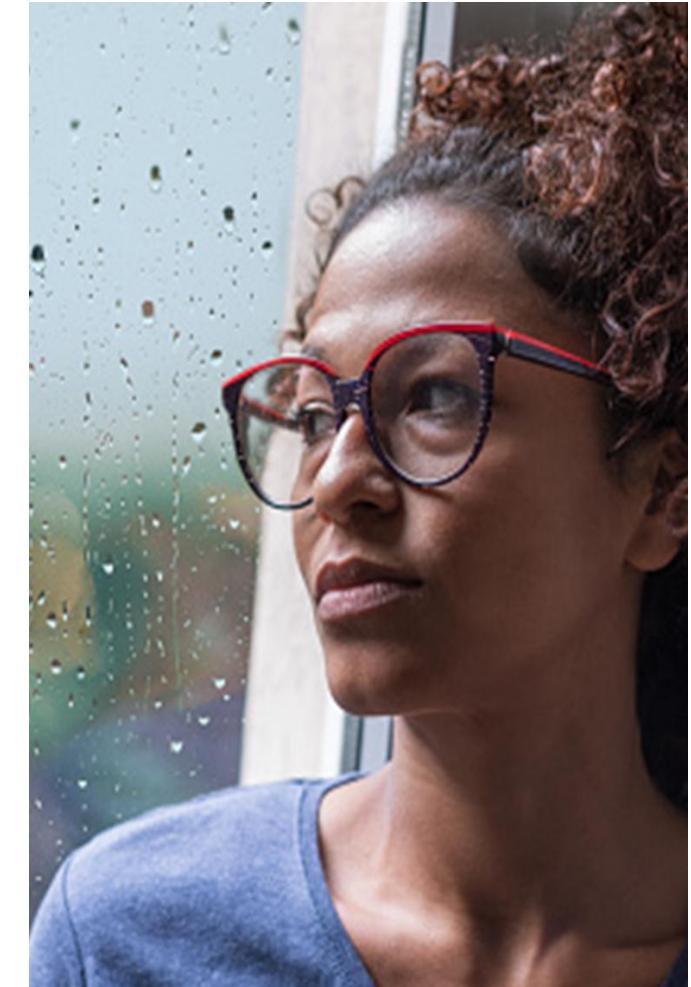
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2. Finding sense of belonging

Key features: struggling to relate and connect with peers, a sense of ‘onlyness’, effect of remote learning during the pandemic

“I just isolated myself and I thought that was kind of the best course of action, just to kind of protect myself. With this whole impostor syndrome thing, it was almost a good enough excuse for me to distance even more. So, I would isolate myself in situations where I did need help, and I did need to reach out and seek some type of support..”



Building capacity

Proactively notice risk factors:

- **Structural factors**

- The university is not a ‘safe space’...but it can be a ‘brave space’

- **Interpersonal factors**

- Peer mentoring (requires ‘well-matched’ peer mentors)
- Well-being challenges (balancing work and study)

Create opportunities for positive experiences:

- Transition experiences (open days, schools outreach, pre-matched peers)
- International students (empathy required)
- Develop cultural awareness (e.g. CSCS scales)
- Focus on both social & academic student life
- Embed reward & recognition into mentoring
- Employ ‘targeted’ initiatives (BHY Create, Empowerment programmes)
- Hold social events (e.g. sip n’ paint – within modules/within the timetable/within the semester), engage in the ‘lift’ chat, be aware of the ‘mature/young student conundrum’



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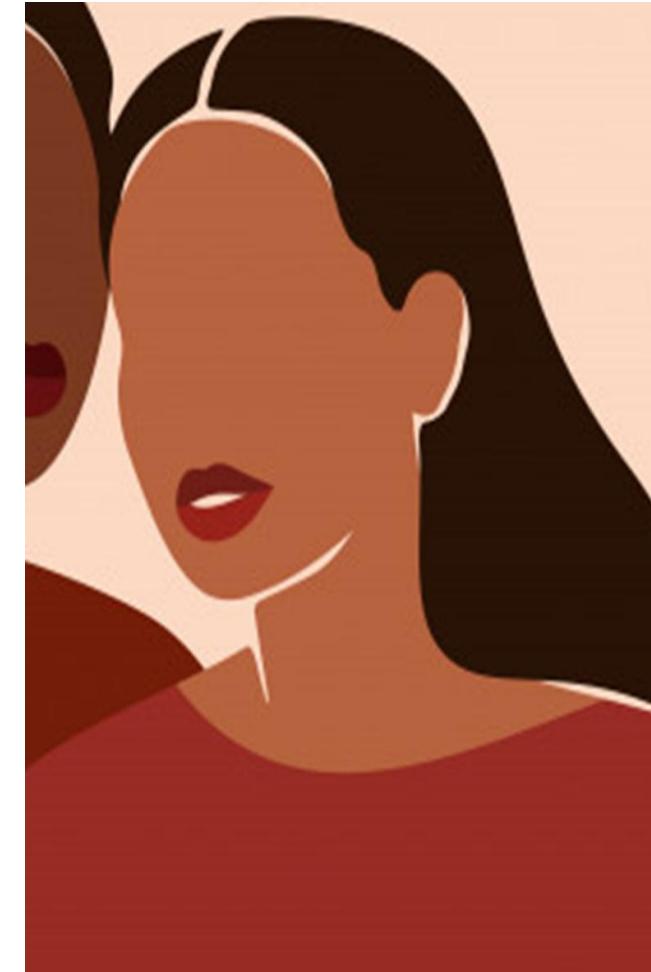
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3. Struggling to maintain and value an authentic self

Key features: intersectionality, stereotype threat, Strong Black Woman schema

“It's a feeling of being watched, or that feeling of having to be a presentable Black person in society. Because if somebody catches you at the wrong moment or at the wrong time, that's the impression that they're going to hold, sadly, for Black people for the rest of their lives. So, every time that you're out in public, you have to be this perfect representative of your race.”



Building capacity

Proactively notice risk factors:

- **Structural factors**
 - Visibility matters for staff & students
- **Interpersonal factors**
 - Paucity of same ethnicity role models (seeing my ‘future self’)

Create opportunities for positive experiences:

- Decolonising the curriculum (institution)
- Promote anti-racist practices
- Recognise cultural holidays on the university calendar
- Shift from ‘tolerance’ to inclusion
- Improve minoritised staff representation on campuses
- We are not the USA!



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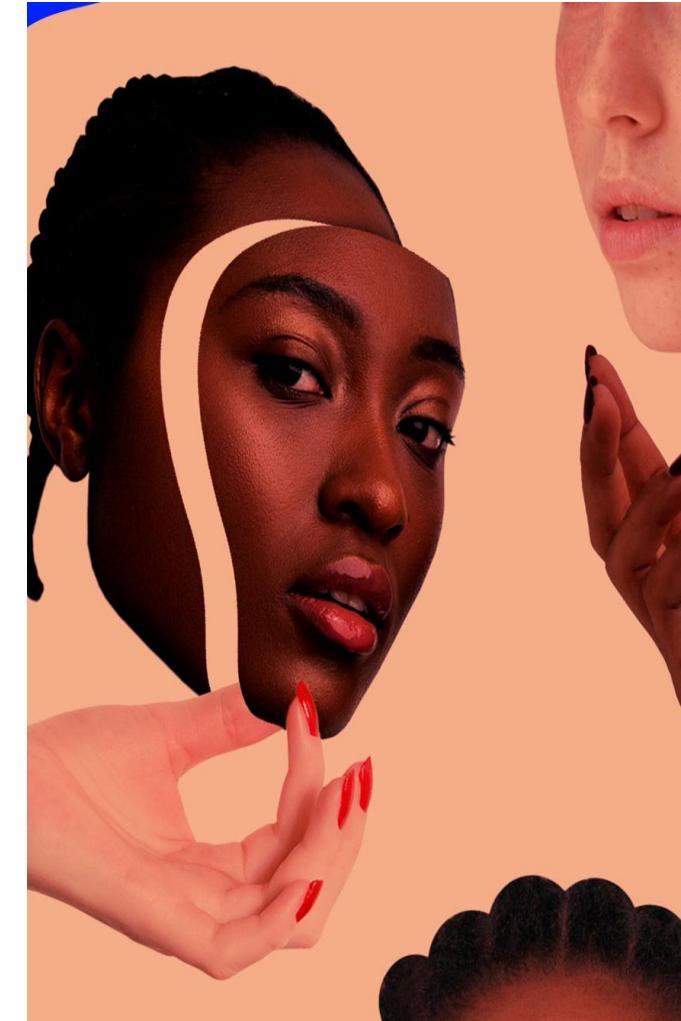
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4. Taming my impostor

Key features: reflection as sense-making, identity work in ‘safe spaces’ (psychological safety)

“I think the idea of separating yourself from things that are sometimes toxic and looking at other people's achievements is a very valid point. And I think that's helped to reduce the impostor phenomenon. To get rid of that completely as well, it might just be like the best thing, but who knows! Who knows how to get rid of it?”



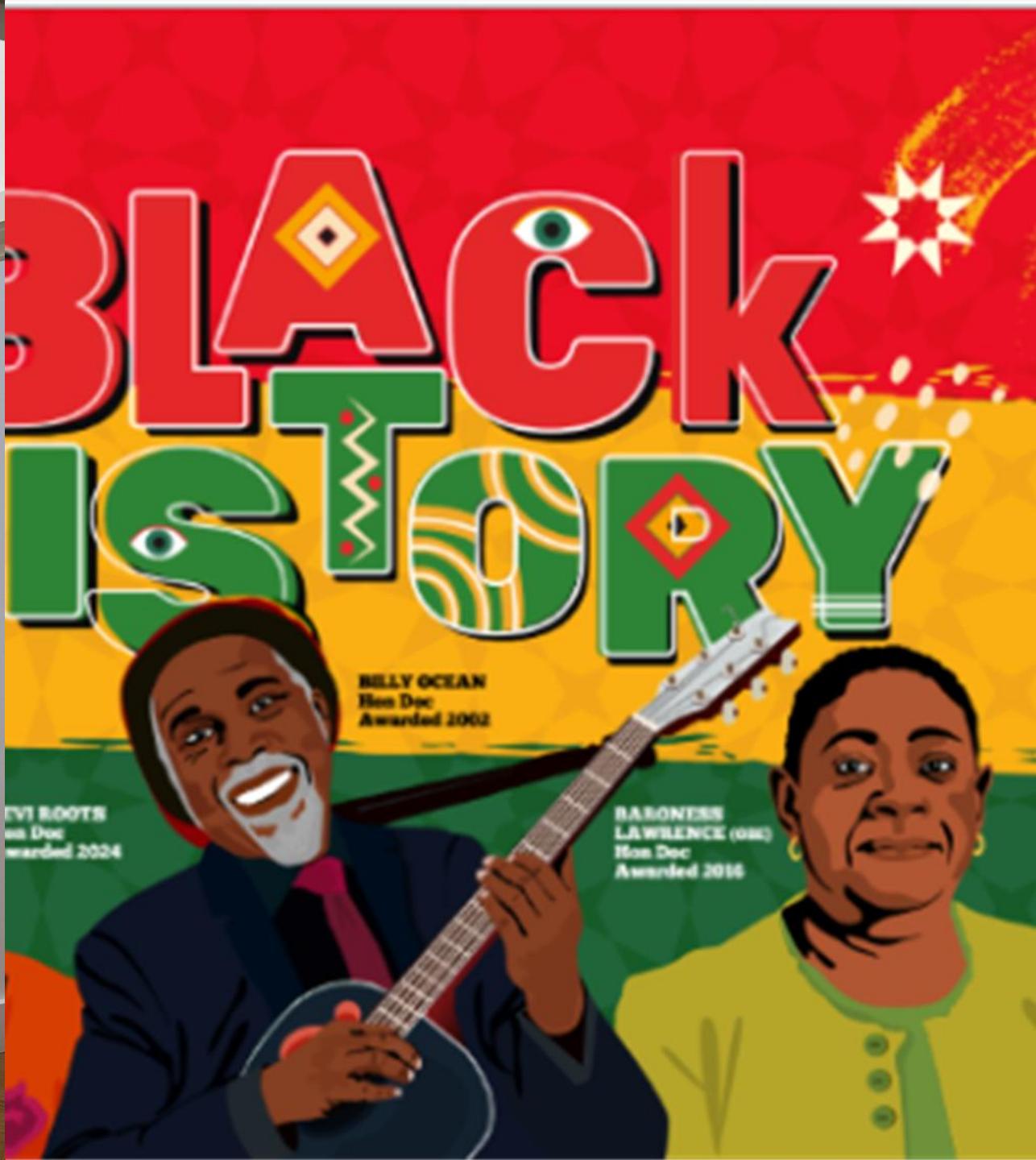
Building capacity

Proactively notice risk factors:

- **Structural factors**
 - Physical spaces, walls, images
 - Some STEM subjects have racist origins:
FACT!
- **Interpersonal factors**
 - Some international students come to the UK with imbibed racist attitudes
 - Recognise the impact of structural racism
 - Impostorism is a ubiquitous experience
 - Reflection for ID grounding

Create opportunities for positive experiences:

- Active senior leaders
- Inspiring talks & discussions
- Directly counter negative attitudes & behaviours
- Encourage counter-narratives to help students see whether their perceptions are driven by internal or structural factors
- Advocate & agitate for minoritised students (and staff)



Ongoing research projects: Impostorism around the globe

- South Asian students
(cross-cultural study:
UK & US)
- Roma communities
(cross-cultural study:
UK & Europe)
- Chinese students
(cultural study: China)



Closing thoughts

❖ **Context matters:** Increase awareness among staff regarding the damaging effects of psychosocial factors on students' academic journeys and prospects of success

- low levels of culturally-sensitive support/diverse staff representation
- non-recognition of effect on student identities & outcomes
- lack of interest in decolonising the curriculum
- limited 'brave' spaces for important 'identity work'

❖ **Representation matters:** Ensure diverse ethnicities are visible at all levels of the university, including lecturers and senior managers, to affirm an academic identity in students from racially minoritised backgrounds

❖ **Sense of belonging matters:** SoB is key, but requires acceptance of diverse social characteristics to avoid 'othering' & sense of 'onlyness'. Encourage students to be their authentic selves and share experiences within 'psychologically-safe' environments

❖ **Universities** have the power to moderate these effects and BUILD capacity individually & collectively

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Thank you!

- Contact
 - e: husband@westminster.ac.uk
 - LinkedIn: Dr Deborah Husbands CPsych

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