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Shaking off the shackles of imposterism

Laura Kilby offers up some advice based on her own journey

I describe myself as a mid-career academic. I'm not sure I actually feel 'mid-career' though... my entry to academia was later in life, and so it all still feels pretty new. But in the eight years since completing my PhD, I have learned a lot about how to balance the challenges of research and teaching in a large post-92 institution. I have been successful, or perhaps lucky, in terms of the Research Excellence Framework. I can demonstrate steady career development from Lecturer to Senior Lecturer to Principal Lecturer to Reader, and I have Research Leadership experience. Yet underneath the gloss of my academic journey, as with any, there's a sense of messiness.

Here, I hope to offer something honest, a 'behind-the-scenes' exploration that might help liberate at least some readers from the relentless pressure to achieve which affects all of us. It's a pressure that we perpetuate through our participation in a culture that upholds unremitting achievement as the measure of success. In this environment, especially at moments when I appear to be achieving, I have sometimes felt like a fraud – an imposter. I am far from alone in this experience, but

what does it mean to be an imposter? How might we, as academics and psychologists, create an alternative narrative to free ourselves from this hamstrung state?

Imposter Syndrome

Imposter Syndrome (discussed in these pages by Christian Jarrett in a 2010 article) is thought to comprise three main tendencies:

- to think that other people have an inflated perception of our abilities;
- to fear that our true abilities will at some point be uncovered;
- to attribute successes to luck or other external factors.

The briefest scout around Twitter suggests Imposterism is rife in the shared discourses of academic life. For some academics it might be more a presentational strategy than a deep rooted sense of fraudulence, but for many this experience can be crippling.

To understand why Imposter Syndrome can be so common, particularly amongst early career academics, we need to consider the well-trodden path of undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral studies many of us share. Achievement at each stage allows us to progress until, eventually, our senior peers are satisfied that we pass muster. Typically, the summit of this journey involves the successful defence of our doctoral thesis and the conferment of a PhD. This pivotal moment marks out our rights to a seat at the academic table. Of course, we soon realise that the table is over-crowded, and the pecking order is more of a Downton Abbey affair than most of us are familiar with. Just as we think we have found our seat, the music stops and some other hungry postgrad grabs it before we realise what's happened.

Our developing academic and research capabilities, as well as the product of our labours, are continually judged by those who have gone before, and who hold academic rank above us. We are schooled to look longingly up the chain of increasing academic and scholarly rank and prestige to receive our validation. We turn to the knowledge and expertise of PhD supervisors; to the detached intellectual command of external examiners; and to the brilliance of senior colleagues and experienced researchers in our field.

It is not simply that we look to our senior peers for approval; we also look to them for disapproval. An integral feature of doctoral study is the iterative critique of our work. Across a minimum of three years we routinely present our offerings to supervisors in order to discover all that is lacking, limited or lost. Regardless of how supportive or respectfully this feedback is delivered, or how crucial this process might be to the creation of a 'good academic', we learn to

expect that our work is not yet good enough.

We perhaps unwittingly also learn that we are not yet good enough. This continues right up until the day of our viva, and then for many of us, a familiar cycle abruptly ends. In the space of a couple of hours we finally receive approval and validation that we are now 'good enough'.

The voice

When the dust settles and the post-viva glow cools, it can be a shock to hear an internal voice quietly whispering 'What if they got it wrong?', 'You just got a really nice external/ a great supervisor', or 'You probably fluked it'. This voice is hard to ignore: so much rests on the subjective opinion of those who set us free. Psychology remains an environment where subjectivity presents so many with such difficulty; we're steeped in empirical concerns about 'what counts'. Little wonder, then, that when receiving our academic wings rests on the subjective judgement of peers, we might struggle to trust the outcome.

As the early career journey begins, that disquieting voice can become increasingly persistent. The weight of academic expectation is heavy. Suddenly our peers look to us, assuming that we can now do all of the things which we spent so long being told that we could not yet do. Standing in front of a lecture hall full of students for the first time; submitting our first paper; even attending that initial departmental meeting presents daunting new challenges. Perhaps it was all a mistake and we shouldn't really be there? 'It's only a matter of time before I'm found out...'

Alongside our competitive struggles to secure a job, we battle to be published, dealing with rejection and often harsh comments from reviewers along the way. We fight for funding with little or no chance of success. Amongst what often feels like a perpetual sea of *no, no, no*, how are we to trust that elusive 'yes' when it lands?

What is to be done?

Let's look for an alternative and more empowering perspective. As a critical social psychologist, I also want to link that perspective to the people, the communities, and the societies that ultimately we all work for.

Having spent many years working in commercial environments before entering academia, I know that Imposter Syndrome affects people in all professional walks of life. Yet, as academics, we can sometimes feel like our experiences cannot possibly translate to any other environment; we feel isolated from our non-academic friends and peers. This can create a divide in understanding one another's professional

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lives, and it can also contribute to an unhelpful academic snobbery or superiority. We imagine our profession and our challenges are unique in ways that they simply are not. So the first lesson is, we are not alone in this.

In order to develop a more useful narrative that leads us away from feelings of Imposterism, we need to step back and consider who holds our gaze when we search for approval. Imagine for a moment that your academic peers are lined up to the right in order of increasing importance, and to your left, the rest of the world stretch out. In our early years of academic development we are encouraged to face right, constantly seeking approval from those who are further along. Now turn your head to the left. Perhaps the first people you see are your own research participants, the people without which there would be little to share with those to our right. Look further along, perhaps you see the wider groups whom our participants represent... those who will reap the benefits from the advances in our field. Further still are people who seemingly have no real connection to our field, but who may still feel the ripples of our work one day. Further still, beyond our gaze, are the people,

communities and societies that remain hidden from us. We might never know how our work could come to touch their lives, but we cannot be certain that it won't.

Surely we should look both left and right in trying to assess the meaning and the value of our work? In looking ever right, we can become so burdened with feeling like a fraud that we risk losing sight of the immense privilege of our position. By looking left we can re-explore these feelings. Are they driven by those who we work on behalf of, or by ideas/fears/concerns about the judgements of those with more power than us?

By asking these simple questions we are reminded of our privilege. We start to reassess ourselves and understand the power of our academic voice. We can start to locate our responsibilities to those we work on behalf of as central to our endeavours.

No gods, only people

So, with all this in mind, let's go back to the three components of Imposter Syndrome. Firstly, and perhaps most centrally, how can we disrupt the

feeling that other people have an inflated perception of our abilities? If the people in question are 'other academic people', we simply need to flip our thinking. Given that all our academic successes and failures depend on how our work is judged by our senior peers, supervisors, reviewers and the like, and that their rights to make such judgements flow from their own academic standing, isn't it more likely that we have developed an over-inflated perception of *their* abilities?

To suggest we might over-inflate the abilities of our peers is not to deny anyone their brilliance. My academic life is peppered with people whose work has shaped everything that I do, and there are a few figures who have quite literally transformed the way that I understand the world. But, no matter how brilliant, there are no gods in academia, only people. We sit with baited breath waiting for others to find us out for all our flaws and fallibility, whilst seeing only perfection in them. Let's instead recognise that none of us can offer the other perfection. Let us trust our academic peers when they tell us, in the many ways of academia, that our work is good enough and our capabilities sound.



We asked on Twitter (@psychmag):

During your journey in psychology, have you felt like an imposter?

(421 votes)

We can now begin to let go of the related fear that our true abilities will be found out. Recognising our peers for their true abilities allows us to value our own abilities more fairly. The likelihood is that our true abilities are already being accurately judged, and if for some reason they are not, then it requires us to be more open to displaying our truth, and in trusting that it will be good enough. Moreover, who knows what our future work might offer? We must also remember to look left, and consider more closely who our work needs to be good enough for, and how we can make it accessible and meaningful.

The final point about crediting our success to external factors might not be such a problem if we worry less about where success resides in order to claim it. In reality, most achievements are a combination of our own contribution and external factors: luck, the contribution of others alongside us, timing and so forth. If we worry less about who *owns* the success and think more about who *benefits* from our successes, this becomes a moot point.

Shaking off the shackles of Imposterism does not mean becoming boastful, or less willing to acknowledge our shortcomings. Nor does it mean being less respectful of our peers. If anything, rejecting these feelings means welcoming a different kind of vulnerability: one that is based in offering our truth, valuing the truth of others, and making space for different kinds of judgements.

This kind of vulnerability is exciting and important for the future of psychology. It creates a culture of curiosity, it offers the freedom to try and to fail, and ultimately it encourages us to stretch our abilities, allowing the exploration of new ideas and possibilities currently beyond our reach. Our academic communities would be stronger if our imposters strike out and become our disrupters.

Physician, heal thyself...

Writing this article has alerted me to the comfort I find in familiarity. I experience relatively few feelings of Imposterism when I am operating in familiar contexts. I believe in the value and quality of my research these

days, and for the most part I feel strong and confident in my academic identity. That does not mean that I am not challenged by peers, colleagues, reviewers and the like, and where that challenge is grounded in concerns for furthering the pursuit of our discipline I tend to be resilient and responsive to it. It does not cause me to crumble with feelings of fraudulence... quite the opposite. I see it as indication that my work is making a contribution that others want to engage with.

I am also relatively lucky that I have not experienced many challenges that are driven by meaningless negativity, or personal vitriol. I see this kind of thing affecting a worrying number of academic folk via social media, and I know it can be incredibly damaging. We need to do all we can to support colleagues who do find themselves under public attack in what are seemingly egoistic attempts at academic one-upmanship.

Such issues aside, writing this article has required me to step into unfamiliar territory. A different way of writing, a wider audience and a subject matter that I have no research pedigree in. I suspect that my choice

not to write much of 'me' into the article reflects an attempt to ground my arguments in my professional identity rather than personal experience. I'll admit it, I'm nervous around upholding the personal as a valid place from which to argue. The talk I gave on this topic when the Psychology Postgraduate Affairs Group came to my university was all about the personal. Maybe this suggests that I trust that the personal

will be acceptable to my junior colleagues, but I don't quite think it will cut it with a potentially more diverse audience. I suspect the personal remains a site where my imposter lurks.

I also began writing this full of conviction and relatively untroubled. Yet as I developed the counter-narrative, suggesting that we need to recognise our over-inflated perceptions of the abilities of others, I felt a sense of unease. I was also keenly aware of the irony to be found in writing about Imposter Syndrome whilst second-guessing how my academic peers might judge me. Perhaps you're questioning why my views on the matter deserve to be shared. Again, ironically, I have managed these feelings by telling myself 'You really don't need to worry about it, because let's be honest, [insert big name academic] is never going to bother reading something that is written by someone they have never heard of who is writing about something that is not interesting'.

So I've largely managed to shake off the shackles of Imposterism as my familiarity and confidence have grown. But it still lurks in the shadows beyond my academic comfort zones. It's easier for me to look left and to prioritise the people who I believe matter the most when I know what, and who, is to my right. My challenge continues... how about yours?

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