FACULTY FOCUS

PHILOSOPHY OF TEACHING (HTTPS://WWW.FACULTYFOCUS.COM/TOPIC/ARTICLES/PHILOSOPHY-OF-TEACHING/)

Combating Imposter Syndrome in Academia

November 29, 2021   ✎ **Morgan Chapman and Lynne N. Kennette, PhD(https://www.facultyfocus.com/author/ff-morganchampman/)**

(https://www.facultyfocus.com/)

SIGN UP
(https://magnapubs.pages.co/faculty-focus-sign-up-on-magna/)

T he topic of imposter syndrome has been of interest to many in academia, but the discussion has primarily focused on early-career faculty (e.g., Craven, 2014). We acknowledge that feelings of imposterism can be problematic at any stage of one's career. We also offer suggestions on how to manage these feelings.

It's the first day of class. You have reviewed your notes, class list, and enthusiastically await your new students in a new classroom. You apply your name tag and check your reflection in the windowpane, but the name tag doesn't say your name…"Hello, my name is: FRAUD." Have you ever had this dream or one like it? Imposter syndrome (or more precisely imposter phenomenon, since it is not referring to a clinical diagnosis), was first coined by Clance and Imes (1978) and typically occurs in high-achieving individuals who perceive themselves as less competent than others perceive them to be. This gap causes anxiety and a fear of being "found out" for being a "fraud." This feeling is highly prevalent and experienced by up to 82% of people at some point in their lives (Bravata et al, 2020). For a detailed description, we encourage you to read the review article by Sakulku and Alexander (2011).

Exploring imposter syndrome

Certainly, early-career faculty are familiar with the feelings of imposter syndrome (Craven, 2014), but with the drastic shifts of teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, we recognize that feelings of imposterism can be problematic at any stage of one's career. Pandemic notwithstanding, as we progress, not only do our responsibilities change, but often, so does the nagging comparison we engage in, establishing imposter syndrome as a career-long pest that can strip the joy away from our hard-earned achievements. Imposterism may poke its head up when we start a new role, new course, adopt a new technology, or even when things are not new, but perhaps our perceptions or feelings about teaching have shifted. To combat imposter syndrome, we must better understand it. The authors of this article hope to present a helpful framework to contextualize and repair the discomfort caused by this phenomenon.

The popular conversation around imposter syndrome often revolves around feelings of personal defect and stops there, but there is more to it than that. There are both internal and external factors related to imposter feelings: internal factors include aspects like personality characteristics that arise within the individual, whereas external factors provide social and environmental context occurring outside of the individual, such as difficult students or even societal expectations. Both facets provide opportunity for negative self-take to emerge.

From a psychological perspective, much of the research has described this "syndrome" as a trait which is internal to the individual and as a

result identifies causes that are also internal, such as personality characteristics (e.g., perfectionism, type A) or attachment style. Social psychologists have also given some consideration to the role of social context in generating and managing these feelings (see Feenstra et al., 2020 for a discussion of these two points). As such, use of the term "imposter phenomenon" demonstrates a shift away from individualizing these feelings in order to recognize their widespread nature in the workplace—something faculty may find strangely comforting.

While internal factors relate to who we are, external factors relate to the way things are. For example, imposter feelings can be linked to societal forces; it has been well-documented that women and racialized groups experience higher rates of imposter feelings because of the pervasiveness of stereotypes and subsequent discrimination they experience (Bravata et al., 2020). In this way, external factors begin from conditions at the macro-level, which exist outside of the individual, trickling their way down to produce the uncomfortable feeling that we're not measuring up at work. Other ground-level examples might include institutional policy and workplace norms that create overarching conditions that result in widespread feelings of inadequacy.

Solutions

Given that the underlying causes or triggers of these imposter feelings are both internal and external, combating these feelings must also stem from both of these sources. Below we identify suggestions that you can try the next time you're feeling weighed down with feelings of being an imposter.

Internal antidotes
Addressing and/or changing the cognitive distortions you hold are the most effective ways to manage the negative emotions associated with imposter feelings. Looking at things that are objective and measurable (evaluation of your teaching by students, colleagues, or supervisors) can help address the distortions that you hold about yourself. When you try to look at the situation objectively, you know that you're good at your job, that you were hired based on your merit (both on paper and during a teaching demonstration/interview), and that you continue to be employed because you are good at what you do. Further, the fact that you're worried about being inadequate and worried about being a good teacher means that you care about your students and their learning. In adopting this practice, you can reframe or think about your situation more logically than you are during an imposter "episode".

Additionally, if you share your feelings with others, they will likely provide you with an external perspective of how you are seen by others (e.g., competent) and tell you how they truly see you (rather than how you distortedly see yourself). Alternately, trying to help a colleague or friend work through their own imposter feelings may help you see the logical fallacies in your own thinking. Another approach is to make a realistic assessment of your own abilities such as comparing your student evaluations to some school-wide average or other benchmark, but you should resist the urge to compare yourself to others in every aspect of your profession because everyone's strengths are different. We tend to focus on the strengths of others but highlight our own flaws, so shifting our mindset can help there as well.

When completing tasks, focus on progress rather than perfection and try to shift the source of your self-worth from your work to internal attributes (e.g., you are kind). Be sure to celebrate your successes and/or be mindful of them (e..g, when someone gives you a compliment). Practicing gratitude, such as being grateful for your successes and abilities, has benefits beyond simply countering the imposter feelings. Finally, self-care is important for everyone, so being kind to yourself can help with these feelings as well.

External antidotes
Combating the external factors associated with imposter syndrome, like your workplace culture or overarching societal expectations, is obviously quite a bit more difficult as these aspects are much more challenging for us to control or influence. What many external factors contributing to imposter feelings often have in common is disconnection—from subject matter, students, colleagues, institution, society at large, or even from ourselves. When we experience disconnection, distance, or isolation from these elements, our own feelings of inadequacy can thrive unencumbered. In post-secondary institutions, the pervasiveness of bureaucracy and/or corporatization serves to heighten distance and separation between members. In this sense, social integration and personal connections can have beneficial effects. For example, adopting aspects of an expressive leadership style, which focuses on group well-being through a more connected, personal, and united approach, may address the disconnection that serves to perpetuate comparison. This more open style of leadership can be adopted by faculty and other leaders alike who want to encourage a more collaborative, creative, and comfortable workplace culture. Finally, it is worth considering how alleviating the external contributors of imposter syndrome may be a by-product of maximizing existing institutional frameworks like equity and accessibility. When faculty feel prepared and empowered to perform by having the resources and support they need, they may be less likely to feel fraudulent at work.

Final remarks

Although our focus has been limited to how instructors experience feelings of being imposters, it would serve us well to remember that some of our students may also experience these feelings, especially if they are Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), first-generation college students, or LGBTQ+ (see Bravata et al., 2020 for a discussion). Therefore, the suggestions we provided might also be applicable to our students.

Morgan Chapman is a sociology professor at Durham College in Oshawa, Ontario, Canada. She has a masters in sociology, and is most interested in the

intersections of society, the self, and teaching and learning.

Lynne N. Kennette is a professor of psychology and the research coordinator for the School of Interdisciplinary Studies at Durham College in Oshawa, Ontario, Canada. She has a PhD in cognitive psychology, and is passionate about the scholarship of teaching and learning.

References

Bravata, D. M., Watts, S. A., Keefer, A. L., Madhusudhan, D. K., Taylor, K. T., Clark, D. M., Nelson, R. S., Cokley, K. O., & Hagg, H. K. (2020a). Prevalence, predictors, and treatment of imposter syndrome: A systematic review. Journal of General Internal Medicine, 35(4), 1252-1275. https://dx.doi.org/10.1007%2Fs11606-019-05364-1 (https://dx.doi.org/10.1007%2Fs11606-019-05364-1)

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. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0086006 (https://doi.org/10.1037/h0086006)

Craven, J. G. (2014, September 16). Overcoming the Imposter Syndrome: Advice for New Faculty. Faculty Focus. https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/philosophy-of-teaching/overcoming-imposter-syndrome-advice-new-faculty/ (https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/philosophy-of-teaching/overcoming-imposter-syndrome-advice-new-faculty/)

Feenstra, S., Begeny, C. T., Ryan, M. K., Rink, F. A., Stoker, J. I., & Jordan, J. (2020), Contextualizing the imposter "syndrome". Frontiers in Psychology, 11, 575024. https://dx.doi.org/10.3389%2Ffpsyg.2020.575024 (https://dx.doi.org/10.3389%2Ffpsyg.2020.575024)

(https://www.facultyfocus.com/)

Sadulku, J., & Alexander, J. (2011). The imposter phenomenon. International Journal of Behavioral Science, 6(1), 75-97. https://doi.org/10.14456/ijbs.2011.6 (https://doi.org/10.14456/ijbs.2011.6)

ıl Post Views: 5,132

IMPOSTER SYNDROME (HTTPS://WWW.FACULTYFOCUS.COM/TAG/IMPOSTER-SYNDROME/)

ALSO ON FACULTY FOCUS

Developing a Reflective Practice …	Use Revise and Resubmit Instead of …	Why I Went from Proctored Exams to …	Shuffle the D Establishing
3 months ago • 1 comment	4 months ago • 4 comments	2 months ago • 1 comment	4 months ago • 2 c
We should work to set the problems in pandemic instruction so that they …	Having students revise and resubmit work can be a more effective way to …	Making a transition from proctored exams to open-book exams and how …	To provide a ser belonging in dist learning classes

TOPICS

Select Category