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## "Everyone will Realize I Don't Belong Here:" On the Support of Students Experiencing Imposter Syndrome

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## **“EVERYONE WILL REALIZE I DON’T BELONG HERE:” ON THE SUPPORT OF STUDENTS EXPERIENCING IMPOSTOR SYNDROME**

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Impostor syndrome, or the feeling of fraudulence and not belonging in one’s role, is commonly experienced by university students. Despite the term ‘syndrome’ to describe this psychological phenomenon, external environment can play a contributory role, such as a student fearing they will face unconscious bias later in academic life. It is my opinion that a supportive relationship, with open communication, between lecturer (or doctoral supervisor) and student can significantly mitigate these distressing feelings and enable the student to feel comfortably integrated into their academic environment.

### **An Introduction to Impostor Syndrome**

Throughout my life in higher education, I have continually experienced self-critical thoughts and emotions. Every academic milestone I reached, which resulted in my attainment of a Bachelor’s degree in Applied Biomedical Sciences and then a Master’s degree in Microbiology—and my current position as a PhD student in Biomedical Sciences—has been accompanied by the persistent feeling that my achievements were not my own; that I did not ‘deserve’ to have reached the milestones I did, and that it was only a matter of time until everyone around me came to the same conclusion. I have come to learn that this phenomenon is not unique to me, but manifests in a wide range of people, and is commonly known as impostor syndrome.

Impostor syndrome refers to a self-perception of fraudulence, which may be contextualized by its prevalence in people who perceive their roles to be unwarranted by their own competency or external evidence of suitability for the role, and that instead they find themselves in such positions by oversight or chance; hence they feel themselves to be ‘impostors’ in their roles (Feenstra et al., 2020; Hawley, 2019). Traits of impostor syndrome have been quantified by the Perceived Fraudulence Scale. Among others, these traits include self-criticism, social anxiety, and depressive tendencies (Kolligian & Sternberg, 1991). It has been extensively described in people working in academia (Jaremka et al., 2020). The term ‘syndrome’ implies a problem with an individual’s self-esteem, to be overcome by them alone, but the external environment can contribute (Hawley, 2019). Doctoral students in particular face unique challenges of independent research. In my experience, doctoral studies bring with them a transitional feeling; due to the passage of time, accumulation of experience, and the unique structure of a laboratory-based PhD, which involves largely solitary experimenting under the guidance of a small supervision team led by a principal investigator, I no longer feel like a typical university student, as I did to a large extent during my Bachelor’s degree and to a lesser extent during my Master’s degree. My role comes with almost exclusive involvement with staff in a range of roles, including laboratory technicians, postdoctoral fellowship holders, lecturers, senior lecturers, and professors. However, as a registered student with limited time to complete my PhD, I do not feel fully integrated into this environment. A constant sense that one’s role is limited feeds back into the worries

associated with impostor syndrome: the sense that ‘any time now’ I will cease to belong in the laboratory and won’t be able to finish my PhD; in other words, I won’t be ‘successful.’ My idea of short-term success, once I complete my PhD, is to have continued a career in academia through postdoctoral fellowships and be on my way to complete financial independence. My idea of long-term success is to be fully financially independent and well established in academia, with lower levels of clinical anxiety and greater confidence in my abilities. In my experience, supportive supervision and empathetic colleagues make all the difference. The ability to go to my principal investigator (PI—the principal member of my supervision team) to discuss any moments of lapsed confidence with her, and her ability to notice and understand when this is happening to me, has greatly helped me, and enabled me to take some time away from the laboratory when I needed it. The influence of the supervisors cannot be underestimated—nor can acknowledgement and support of mental health problems that are experienced by students.

### **Impostor Syndrome and Unconscious Bias in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) Careers**

My worries for my academic future on the grounds of self-confidence are somewhat compounded by a sense that at least at some point during my academic career, I may face additional unjust barriers beyond my control. This stems from the understanding that despite a relatively even ratio of males and females in STEM from undergraduate to postgraduate doctoral level, the retention of female scientists drops sharply after attainment of a PhD and the gender balance skews heavily to favor men. At the professorial level (in the UK, the title of professor is obtained by promotion through lectureship and senior lectureship; I am aware the definition differs between countries), the ratio of men to women is even higher. While I am white and not under personal detriment by the following intersectional perspective, I am nonetheless troubled by the often-publicized statistic stated in a report by Advance HE that in 2019 there were only 25 UK black women with full professorship status in British universities (Rollock, 2021). This further evidence the persistence of favored demographics in academia, even if in the 21st century this is specifically legislated against, suggesting an unconscious bias. Fortunately, a mixed-methods study of 216 PhD students found no statistically significant difference in the severity of impostor syndrome between black women PhD students and other PhD students (Simon, 2020). This pattern of gender imbalance is replicated at the highest level. There exists a heavily skewed gender ratio among Nobel laureates in the sciences: from 1901 to 2018, only 21 science laureates were women, representing only 3.5% of the total 601 laureates over this period (Grogan, 2019). Even in the 21st century, it appears that women still face a choice between career progression in STEM and a role as spouse and parent; milestones in life that their male counterparts seem to embrace together, as female Nobel laureates are significantly more likely to be unmarried and not to have children than male laureates (Charyton et al., 2011). This suggests that women still have a higher burden placed upon them to fulfil domestic and family responsibilities than their male counterparts and may feel pressure to choose between career advancement and establishing a new family.

Perceiving that one may have to work harder than a large proportion of one’s colleagues to achieve the same level of success may have a demotivational or an anxiety-inducing effect, depending on personality type. A study of 631 Austrian doctoral students, of whom 389

(61.65%) were female, found that female students experience more feelings of being an impostor than male students (Jöstl et al., 2015). To that end, self-affirming one's social identity as a scientist can increase confidence and reduce the effects of impostor syndrome (Ysseldyk et al., 2019). It is my opinion that all lecturers can encourage students, starting at first entry, by sharing anecdotes of their own background and experiences, within reason, as entry is the point at which students compare themselves to their classmates and try to develop their identities at university. Hearing stories from lecturers of a wide range of socio-economic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, as well as different genders and ages, will help; if students from marginalized communities see lecturers of the same community, it should help them feel enfranchised. In addition, if lecturers are appointed as personal or pastoral tutors for specific students, they should encourage the student to engage in regular one-on-one meetings and to engage in open dialogue, encouraging them to build confidence and affirming that they deserve to be at university. Positive encouragement will help new students to put aside any burgeoning impostor syndrome thought patterns and enable them to feel empowered.

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