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The Perfect Imposter Storm: From Knowing Something to Knowing Nothing

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Introduction

My original intention for completing a doctoral program in higher education was to secure a senior administrative position in student affairs at a Canadian university. I wanted to be an equal, at least in terms of credentials, with the Deans and other senior university administrators sitting at the decision-making tables. I went into the program with a decade of leadership and practical experience as a Student Affairs professional and administrator. Early into my studies, I decided to postpone my aspirations of vice presidency and instead seek out a faculty position that would offer opportunities to teach, research and contribute to the literature of higher education. I felt having experience as an academic would add to my knowledge and skills and make me that much more qualified for a senior administrative role.

Upon completion of my doctorate in education, I resigned from my senior leadership position with one institution and accepted a full-time faculty contract position with another university, in 2015, I accepted a tenure-track faculty position with another university to lead and teach in a graduate-level program in higher education administration and leadership. I am now 8 years into academic life and am still—feeling that I am an imposter!

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Clance and Imes describe *imposter phenomena*, or *imposter syndrome* (IS) as it is more commonly known, as ‘an internal experience of intellectual phoniness’ (1978: 241). Despite noted accomplishments and evidence, people who identify as having the imposter syndrome tend to diminish their knowledge, skills and abilities and instead attribute their successes to others, external factors or just plain luck. One of the noted characteristics of imposter syndrome is the ‘persistent self-doubt regarding intelligence and ability’ (Hutchins and Rainbolt 2017: 194). Although IS can plague individuals of any profession, research has identified it as prominent and prevalent in the academic and higher education sectors (Hutchins 2015; Parkman 2016), which is even described as a breeding ground for IS by Young (2011). Imposter syndrome has been identified as part of the new faculty member experience (Hutchins and Rainbolt 2017) as individuals attempt to navigate the often isolating, competitive and individualistic work environment of the academy.

Exactly what makes one person more susceptible to IS than another is a difficult question to answer definitively, is IS simply a case of self-doubt or irrationality on the part of the individual or are there other factors to consider? Slank (2019) challenges the commonly held assumption that someone who identifies with IS is not being rational—after all how can anyone disregard their proven abilities or talents or dismiss their achievements as just luck? Dismissing evidence of success can be, accordingly to Slank, perceived as a ‘failure of rationality’. However, Slank questions if it is irrational or, is it instead, rational to consider the non-talent causes that may have contributed to one’s success. She considers the influence of one’s environment in assessing success. For example, environments like academia reflect a ‘culture of genius’ and can foster IS in individuals.

Likewise, Breeze (2018) challenges us to think about IS as a public feeling rather than something only felt by an individual. By reframing our understanding of and research about IS as a public matter—one rooted in and fostered by political, economic, social and global influences, we move away from scrutinizing what is wrong with the individual that would have them feel like an imposter and instead begin to critically analyze and challenge the contexts within which it exists.

Breeze’s (2018) and Slank’s (2019) works resonated with me as I reflected on my own imposter feelings over the past few years as a new faculty member. I am aware of the multiple factors that may have contributed to a sense of not belonging and questioning my own abilities. Firstly, transitioning from being a higher education practitioner to a scholar, becoming a scholar practitioner,

has its own noted challenges (Bosetti et al. 2008). Moving from an administrative role—ripe with deadlines, interactions, visibility and collaboration, to a faculty role—known to be autonomous, isolating and competitive, is a culture shock. Secondly, in Canada, higher education as an area of academic scholarship is still not well recognized within the academy. I frequently encounter a blank stare or look of confusion from faculty colleagues when I identify my area of study and expertise as higher education administration and leadership. Finally, given the often-held assumption that women are more susceptible to IS (Parkman 2016), I may have just assumed IS as a given. Had I realized when I started my journey into academia that there would be several external forces that would enhance any feelings of uncertainty and self-doubt in my abilities, I may not have been so quick to assume personal deficiency and identify as an imposter.

Framed as a critical autobiographical self-study, the following chapter offers my critical reflection, informed by the literature and my experiences, on how each of the factors and the intersections between them may have contributed my own imposter syndrome.

An Critical Autobiographical Self-Study

Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) reference C. Wright Mills' work from 1959 as foundational to understanding how self-study writing can qualify as research. Self-study research must be more than simply a biographical account of an issue. Instead it must connect biography and history in a way that allows the researcher's 'private experience (to)...provide insight and solution for public issues and troubles and the way in which public theory can provide insight and solution for private trial...' (Bullough and Pinnegar 2001: 15). Likewise, Walker posits that critical autobiographical research, rooted in narrative inquiry and critical theory paradigms, can provide researchers with a framework to critically reflect upon past events with the intention of enhancing one's understanding of self and life. By deconstructing the social statuses that influence experiences, a researcher is able to advance their sense of self identity, empowering them to move forward (2017: 1902).

By drawing upon the literature, I am seeking to understand my experiences transitioning from the administrative side of a university to the academic side. By moving between my lived experiences and the literature, I can make connections between practice and theory, offer insights on where there is alignment between the two and explore where there is a disconnection. A

self-study is not to *prove* something but rather it is to critique, challenge and provoke further inquiry (Bullough and Pinnegar 2001: 20).

Practitioner to Scholar

Scholar-practitioner and *pracademic* are terms commonly used to describe someone who holds both practical experience and scholarly credentials in their area of expertise. A perusal through the literature reveals that while different professions and fields of study claim to own such terms there is a shared consensus about their meaning: someone who has knowledge and experience in both the theoretical and practical sides of a subject/profession. Posner references the value of pracademics within the public administration sector as ‘...adaptable and cross-pressured actors (who) serve the indispensable roles of translating, coordinating and aligning perspectives across multiple constituencies’ (2009: 16). Volpe and Chandler (2001: 245) use the term to refer to faculty members who are scholars in conflict resolution and who actively serve in the role of facilitating conflict resolution within their own institution. Mooney and MacDonald (2011) advocate for political science scholars to actively engage in pracademic work by developing working relationships with practitioners in the political sphere.

Regardless of the profession or academic area of expertise, to qualify as a pracademic one is expected to have sound knowledge (academic) of the theoretical foundations of a field of study and to possess practical experience (knowledge application and proven skill set) in that same field. Being able to facilitate connections between industry and the academy as well as being able to offer students, faculty and practitioners a well-rounded understanding and perspective based on knowledge and practice are a skillset and position gained only through substantial practical experience and education, placing pracademics between the worlds of academics and practitioners. One might assume that being a pracademic is to have the best of both worlds—but what I thought would be a prized possession proved to be more of an oddity in terms of professional identity.

The transition into academia, whether as a seasoned practitioner or as a young scholar, is known to be a difficult one (Yeo et al. 2015: 284). It is a journey full of the challenges of balancing the demands of teaching, researching and community service with the multiple roles in one’s personal life, the transition into a new role is where imposter feelings can begin to take root. A plethora of literature detailing the experiences of new faculty identifies feelings of inadequacies, frustration, pressure and isolation. As a new

faculty member, you are expected to have some sort of academic identity—something that is growing increasingly complex given not only what we know to be the challenges of entering the academy but the changing landscape of higher education and what it means to be an academic (Gale 2011). As an administrator, I knew the role and responsibilities of my position and if for some reason I was unclear a quick perusal through my contract or job description was all it took to get back on track. I knew who I reported to and who reported to me. This clarity has not been my reality as an academic. I know what is involved with teaching but beyond that I am still trying to identify who I am as an academic and what my responsibilities are.

My experience has reflected Bosetti et al.'s (2008) documented feelings of incompetence as they each attempted to navigate processes and systems as faculty members. Knowledge of and experience as an administrator does not prepare you for the feelings of isolation and uncertainty with no handbook or step by step tutorial on how to be and what to know as a faculty member. This sense of powerlessness is very real and can leave you feeling like an imposter.

Comparable to Bosetti et al. (2008) findings, Perry et al. (2019) identified the need for institutions to ensure new faculty members are supported during their transition and that they are engaged to avoid feelings of isolation and loneliness. The addition of mentorship opportunities for new faculty and assistance with learning the academic culture are identified by the researchers as priorities for institutions. They conclude with a call for additional research to develop strategies to address challenges. I recall sitting in my new faculty office waiting for someone to tell me how to be a faculty member—I am still waiting!

Whether one moves from administration to faculty or vice-versa the change between the two cultures is apparent, even in the same institution. Both Foster (2006) and Kniess (2019) draw attention to the differences between an institution's administrative and academic cultures. The mindset of administrators and faculty are quite different as is the way they approach their respective roles. How one organizes their time, for example, is substantially different between the two positions with administrators often having a prescribed meeting agenda, constant interaction with other colleagues and a to-do list with deadlines, while faculty are left to manage their own time with much autonomy and self-direction. The administration's focus is on the institutional operations, finances and management compared to the academic's focus on education and research (knowledge creation and dissemination). The two worlds, often, function in isolation of one another and make assumptions about what the other does or does not do.

Since moving into the role of an academic, I have also been privy to and part of discussions about the changing role of higher education and the impact of the entrepreneurial neoliberal direction that universities are increasingly aligning with. As an administrator, my priority like that of my administrative colleagues was to *do more with less* and to balance the department budget. Faculty too are also living the *do more with less* reality of their institutions—the difference, especially for new faculty, from their administrative colleagues is that this added pressure in a role that is already fraught with so much uncertainty, competition and isolation can only foster feeling like an imposter. The ‘hidden injuries of the neoliberal university’ (Gill 2010: 228) reveal the toll the increased pressure and urgency to perform from the university has on faculty. The high levels of stress, burnout and perceived IS are not indicative of faculty inabilities or incompetence. Instead by understanding IS within higher education as a public feeling, the impact of institutional structure, governance and its production-oriented culture are exposed. IS becomes less an individual’s feeling and instead is understood as a public feeling—something that is deeply rooted in the way within which the university exists and functions.

Over the past few years, I have been astounded by what other faculty don’t know or understand about institutional operations and, at the same time, I have been humbled by having to reconsider my own assumptions about life as a faculty member. When I was the recipient of a student’s scathing personal attack in a course evaluation survey I understood for the first time why some faculty I had worked with in the past refuted the use of such tools. There are no other positions that are subjected to that type of evaluation that is then used to decide job permanency, and the results of which remain on your personnel file. As an administrator, I encountered disgruntled students and parents, but comments were not made anonymously, and meetings were held, resolutions were reached and apologies were often offered. As faculty you have little, if any, recourse for addressing derogatory, discriminatory and inflammatory comments about you are very much left to process the experience on your own. Consider this from the perspective of a new faculty member who may be experiencing IS—feelings of not belonging or being good enough would be that much more profound.

I often refer to missing the sense of daily accomplishment as an administrator. Whether it was a written report or having been part of a meeting within which critical issues were resolved or plans were made, I left work at the end of the day feeling that I had moved a widget along. As a faculty member, I don’t often feel that validation. Except for the brief satisfaction that accompanies an accepted manuscript for publication or positive student feedback, there is little else that leaves you feeling validated as a faculty member. I find the silence of the faculty role disheartening at times and I am left

to question if there is something I am missing or is there a requirement I am not fulfilling? Again, I assume I am somehow deficient and the imposter syndrome creeps in.

Higher Education as a Field of Scholarship in Canada

As a new higher education scholar, I frequently encounter curiosity of faculty peers from other disciplines about what it is exactly that I am a scholar of. Higher education as a field of study or academic scholarship has not been as prevalent in Canada compared to the United States, Australia or European countries. Kirkness (1987) noted the discipline's emergence in Canada in the early 1960s alongside the rapid establishment of many universities. The appointment of the University of Toronto's Dr. Robin Harris as a professor of higher education was instrumental in creating a movement to have higher education recognized as a field of study. He and others came together and established The Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education (CSSHE) in 1970; and, what is still the sole academic journal specific to Canadian higher education, the *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, was created in 1971. The Society is still the only national association in Canada dedicated to the research of higher education and the journal continues to be a principal source of Canadian research and literature in the field.

Today there are a handful of graduate-level higher education programs offered by Canadian universities. The limited programming means there are few faculty positions available in Canada specific to the teaching and research of higher education. The small network of scholars also means there is a limited number of seasoned faculty to be mentored by. As a new scholar entering the lead faculty position for one of the newer graduate programs I drew on support from my administrative colleagues from across the country and despite their wise words and kindness, they could not relate to the transition challenges of moving into a faculty role—in fact many still scratch their heads as to why I crossed over to the dark side to begin with!

Bothello and Roulet (2018) refer to the imposter syndrome they experienced as new scholars as being intensified as management academics—a field of study focused on management and business education that spans across different disciplines. The multidisciplinary make up of their field contributed to feelings of uncertainty and confusion around their area of expertise and

research. I relate well with the authors' experience given the limited field of higher education scholarship in Canada.

The well-known *publish or perish* mantra is daunting as a new faculty member. Not having a research focus can compromise one's academic identity and feeds into IS that much more. New faculty members look to the *A-Listers* in their field—assuming that is the standard and set out to be like them, putting additional and unreasonable pressure on themselves. When I was first asked what my research interests were I rhymed off a list as tall as I am—anything and everything that interested me, and I was confused by the chuckles around the table of faculty colleagues. It wasn't until I happened to hear another faculty member answer the same question that I realized—*Oh! They meant what do I research!* That experience, and there have been others, left me feeling like an outsider given I was not familiar with academic lingo. Another example of being lost in translation is *academic freedom*. Upholding academic freedom was not a foreign concept to me as an administrator, but my understanding of it has deepened and my position on it has changed. No longer do I consider academic freedom to simply refer to faculty being able to share knowledge or critique the status quo. Instead I have come to understand and respect its pivotal significance in the role and responsibility of being an academic. The responsibility to challenge and critique the status quo and the quest for new knowledge without fear of punishment or reprisals is at the very core of what it means to be an academic.

Looking to engage with the Canadian network of higher education scholars, I joined the sector's national association and promptly found a seat on the Board. The association is comprised of roughly 200 members—primarily scholars and graduate students. The annual conference is well attended and showcases the latest research and publications. My first observation was noticing an absence of practitioners, administrators and leaders of our universities and colleges. There are different schools of thought on whether an academic association should in fact include non-academic folk. Organizers of the first Consortium of Higher Education Researchers (CHER) in 1988 specified that to be a member of CHER one had to be 'an academic interested in research on higher education and not a practitioner' (Kehm and Messelin 2013: 1). The priority was not on establishing best practices but was instead to advance knowledge and research about higher education. CSSHE likewise placed an emphasis on its role being research and knowledge sharing (Kirkness 1987) suffice to say for me it was one more gap between the world I had known as an administrator and practitioner and the one I know now.

Criteria for inclusion in academic associations is less about having practiced within higher education and more about being published, and I would

be so bold as to suggest that the higher your number of publications the higher your rank within the membership. For a field relatively small in comparison to other academic disciplines in Canada, one might think that lowering the drawbridge and inviting non-academic colleagues—who are putting theory into practice every day might enhance the network and enrich the field. Alas this is not the case and as a new academic, coming into the academic association with bucket loads of practical experience but little in the way of an academic identity, I was once again feeling like an imposter and an outsider.

Being a Woman—Reason Enough for the Imposter Syndrome?

Since Clance and Imes' (1978) claim that IS was more prevalent among women than men, other researchers have found that this is not necessarily the case (Young 2011). Slank draws attention to the fact that despite an absence of conclusive evidence that women are more susceptible to IS, it is a commonly held assumption and as such people just accept and expect that IS is a woman's reality. She posits: 'In public discourse, the belief that women suffer IP has been absorbed into the familiar narrative where women are dispositionally unsuited to the pressures of competition and achievement, which explains why they on average do not succeed to the extent that their male counterparts do' (2019: 208). IS has not been proven to be any more a woman's challenge than it is a man's (Parkman 2016), and although it is something that can plague individuals of any profession it has been noted as prevalent within the higher education sector.

Inequity between men and women is not isolated to any one profession—academia has as much or more than any other sector. The exclusion of women from higher education has a long and deeply rooted history. In 1929, long after the establishment of universities and colleges, Canadian women won their challenge of the British North American Act denying women the recognition and rights of being a person (*Edwards v. Canada (Attorney General)* 1929). When you consider the exclusion of women being so engrained in the beginning of the higher education sector is it any wonder that there is still evidence of bias and discrimination against women in the fabric of these institutions?

The inequity between women and men in academia with respect to positions, salaries, research opportunities and leadership continues as evidenced in a recent report by Catalyst, a non-profit organization founded in 1962

with a mandate to assist organizations address issues of gender inequity in the workplace and to advance women's professional progress (Catalyst 2020). According to their report, women in academia around the world lag behind their male counterparts in rank and salary. For example, in Australia, women academics hold more of the junior-ranked lecturer and professor positions than men and only 33.9% of the senior-ranked professor positions; in Canada, between 2018 and 2019, women held 28.0% of the full professor ranks, 44% of associate professors, 50% of assistant professors and the majority of positions (55%) ranked below assistant professor. Pay inequity in Canadian universities between men and women continues with women at the full professorship earning an average of \$8300.00 less per year. In 2016, women academics held 41.3% of the academic positions across the Europe Union (EU-28). Only 26.8% of the senior academic positions in the United Kingdom are held by women, slightly higher than the rates in other countries like France (21.9%), Switzerland (23.3%) and Sweden (25.4%). The same is true for academic leadership positions in Europe with only 21.7% held by women in 2017. Pay inequity for women academics is evident in the UK with women earning 15.1% less than men in academic positions (Catalyst 2020).

Knowing that you are more likely to be paid less, promoted less frequently and overlooked as a leader simply because you are a woman is more than unjust or unfair. To know that despite how hard you work, how many credentials you have or how much you must contribute, that you are deemed to be less than simply because you are a woman is quite frankly—*soul sucking*. To Slank's (2019) and Young's (2011) point, even without the empirical evidence to confirm that women are more susceptible to IS than men, the public perception of what women can and should be capable of perpetuates this vicious cycle of inequity. If we continue to believe that IS is a *norm* for women, then we may inadvertently be *normalizing* it—diminishing the negativity and emotional turmoil that comes with it. We may be also reinforcing the perception that IS is an individual's issue and feeling, something that Breeze (2018) rightly challenges us to reconsider. If instead we fully understand the structural, political and social influences that foster this sense of failure and not being enough, then we are better positioned to expose and counter the sources for IS.

Throughout my professional career, I have had the privilege to work with stellar leaders—university presidents, provosts, directors and deans. Some were women, but most were men. I have encountered as much support from male colleagues as I have discriminatory behavior from them. I once had a male colleague tell me when he learned that I was accepted into a doctoral

program ‘*You need to get your doctorate because you don’t have a penis*’. I think he may have thought he was being supportive—pointing out the inequity in opportunity if I were to stay at the same academic credential rank as he had. I just remember thinking *a simple congratulations would be enough*.

In a recent special issue on women and leadership in higher education (White and Burkinshaw 2019), researchers identified the barriers that continue to obstruct women’s professional progression into leadership roles with higher education. Women occupy fewer positions in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) academic disciplines from which the likelihood of appointment to senior leadership roles is higher than other disciplines. Little has been done to make faculty positions more attractive for women seeking flexibility in their work schedule or to address the wage gap between men and women faculty. All this to say that opportunity for a woman to be a faculty member or academic leader is still not what it is for a man. The inequity is so deeply embedded in the sector that one must wonder if it will be righted anytime soon.

The Perfect Imposter Storm

Using a critical autobiographical framework to reflect upon and share my transition experiences from an administrator to faculty gave me opportunity to further investigate the concept of the imposter syndrome and critically assess the degree to which I consider myself afflicted with it. The literature I reviewed challenged me to think differently about IS. Without question, I experienced what most do when they start a new job—excitement about the change and trepidation about my abilities to fulfill the job requirements.

For me the imposter syndrome took hold as I moved from one side of the university to the other. Fraught with tensions at the best of times, administrators and faculty co-exist within the same institution, each working within their own organizational culture. As an administrator, I prided myself on my relationships with students and faculty members, my in-depth knowledge of institutional policies and processes, and in the responsibility that came with my leadership position. I thought I knew what the faculty world would be like—more teaching and more writing and lots of flexibility. Little did I know.

I moved from being in the know, a leader at the boardroom table, to feeling as though I knew very little, if anything. This was compounded by being at a different university as well. As a new faculty member, I was left on my own, as is typically the journey for any new faculty member, to find my way, to

figure out my own academic identity, to be able to craft a research agenda, to find and network with colleagues, to contribute to the academic community and to navigate academic regulations from a different side. The isolation and autonomy of the faculty role was foreign to me and added to my self-doubt and the negative head space. My assumption of the value of being a pracademic was short lived. My years of practice meant little to faculty or staff—faculty saw me as a former administrator from the other side and staff saw me as having crossed over to the dark side. Indeed, there was a feeling of being in some sort of wasteland.

The intersections of a new university, the move from administrator to faculty, transitioning into a faculty role and encountering the challenges of being part of a smaller academic discipline exacerbated the imposter syndrome given that any one of the experiences alone is fertile ground for self-doubt and uncertainty. And juxtapose all these experiences with being a woman and *voilà*—the perfect imposter storm!

Lessons Learned

Recognition that the imposter syndrome is more about embedded bias, inequities and oppressive practices in our society and institutions than it is, or ever was, any indication of one's assumed inabilities is key to changing the IS conversations. Within higher education, there is a need for further research and understanding about the differences in organizational culture between university administration and academics. Most of us, particularly on the administrative side, fall into higher education as a profession never having set out to be a university or college administrator. There is little that trains you for being an administrator or leader in the complex higher education sector. We know the institution's policies and procedures well but know little about the work happening among our faculty colleagues, and the opposite is true in terms of faculty's knowledge or the administrator's work reality. Had I had a more realistic understanding of what it meant to be a faculty member I may have been better prepared for what awaited me. There is a great deal to be gained for institutions to foster opportunities for in-depth collaboration between faculty and administration colleagues.

Academic identity for a new faculty member is increasingly complex to define, and the need for mentorship type opportunities to learn with and from experienced faculty members is apparent. Institutions may wish to consider incentives in the way of research monies or work load contributions

to bring new and seasoned faculty members together—to reduce the number of closed doors that are frequently the sight down most faculty halls.

Communication and dialogue about new faculty transition challenges are key not only for research purposes but as way of opening support networks and creating a more transparent and accepting work environment. Academic leaders are in positions to intentionally work with faculty to facilitate connections and engagement.

Addressing the challenges and inequities that one faces because of one's gender is a never-ending quest for all of us. As a woman, I am acutely aware of hurdles in place simply because society has deemed my gender less than my male counterparts. And while I recognize the susceptibility I may have for IS by being a woman, I also accept the challenge to rise above that perception and prove otherwise. Reflecting less on what is wrong with me and thinking critically about what is happening around me that may be contributing a sense of IS has helped me see things more clearly. I may never see a future university president when I look in the mirror and nor is that necessarily my goal, but what I no longer see is an imposter.

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