The Imposter Syndrome, or the Mis-Representation of Self in Academic Life

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As academics who have recently entered the “tunnel” of management academia, we witness a troubling phenomenon. Among junior scholars – ourselves included – there is a growing sense of anxiety and self-doubt about the legitimacy of our profession and our position within it. We see much evidence of an “imposter syndrome” (Clance & Imes, 1978) in newly minted academics, a condition where high-achieving individuals either ascribe their accomplishments to luck and contingency rather than individual skill and merit, or find their profession to be a “bullshit job” that provides little social value. This condition leads to a sense of anomie; in more severe cases, individuals live with the constant fear that they will someday lose all credibility, either when they are exposed as charlatans or when their occupation is revealed to be a sham.

Although the imposter syndrome is common in many professions, we consider that certain characteristics intrinsic to management academia progressively intensify this condition. Our occupation is one where the induction rituals – both formal and informal – are in many ways misaligned with the multi-dimensional roles of our profession. This cognitive dissonance leads a growing number of us to question whether we merit the status, legitimacy and rewards that are conferred upon us as members of a hyper-competitive scholarly community.

Induction mantras and the formatting of management academics

In a recent retrospective, Nicole Biggart details how empirical curiosity drove her to join management academia – an experience which now, she laments, stands in stark contrast to the current descent of scholarship into the “theory cave” (Biggart, 2016). As junior academics who ourselves tumbled head-first into this cave, we are well-acquainted with groping in the dark in the hopes of staking out some previously undiscovered conceptual niche. Early on, in our quest to establish a distinct research identity and to be known for “something”, we were often uncritical about how management was positioned vis-à-vis other disciplines, and about the value it provided to society more broadly. This myopia, we propose, is a root cause of the imposter syndrome, and stems from a series of induction rituals – each with an attendant mantra – that we outline below:

"I Theorize Therefore I Am"

The onset of the imposter syndrome often becomes manifest in graduate school, the result of a peculiarly single-minded focus on theory. Many students enter doctoral programs with a wide-eyed aspiration to contribute to the greater good; in our cases, we both entered our programs with a passion for corporate social responsibility and the bottom-of-the-pyramid - we firmly believed that our research would solve problems like poverty! In retrospect, we wonder: had we entered the tunnel from the Care Bears' Kingdom of Caring?

Over time though, we were gradually socialized through coursework, exams, and research assistantships to focus on more conceptual concerns. Context and phenomena were means to an end; sifting through data was useful insofar as it provided material for shaping the ever-elusive theoretical contribution: From PhD programmes to letters from peer-reviewed journals, we were pushed to delve into findings, further excavate the theory cave and find the holy grail of a theoretical contribution. In this sense, our doctoral training functioned as a protected space where we would mostly develop expertise in conceptual refinement rather than specifically tackling practical problems. We became progressively convinced, in fact, that it was easier to switch phenomena-based nails that did not suit our theoretical hammer, rather than find a more appropriate tool.

Once we began as tenure-track faculty though, we were naturally exposed to a broader range of audiences with very different expectations. One of us encountered an owner of a trucking company on a flight who inquired about how to better incentivize his employees, an area outside the scope of the scholar's research. He seemed puzzled that someone teaching in a strategy department could not recommend "best practices" for improving performance. On the other hand, the conceptual skills that we had honed over the years could not be communicated within the span of a conversation – nor would they be deemed particularly interesting to an audience expecting pre-packaged "practical" advice.

As instructors, we would (and still do) come across those who hold the belief that practical experience is a prerequisite for management pedagogy, without which one is ill-equipped to talk about "real-world" and up-to-date knowledge. A colleague of ours who teaches entrepreneurship has been asked incredulously on more than one occasion by students "yes, but have *you* ever started your own company?" Admittedly, over the course of a semester many students gradually recognize the value-added in applying theory to their work, but the obstinate hold-outs prove highly frustrating for us – were they too narrow-minded or were we ill-equipped to teach them what they signed up for?

"Publish (more than your peers) or Perish"

The imposter syndrome is further intensified by another induction ritual inculcated during the PhD, job market and tenure process, namely a focus on outputs. When doctoral programs encourage students to produce dissertations comprised of three separate articles of publishable quality, they inadvertently signal to budding scholars that the merit of academic work is in identifiable results (i.e. the number of "A" publications). Less visible processes favoured within a traditional monograph format – like knowledge accumulation and critical thinking (i.e. challenging taken-for-granted understandings of the world) – are treated as secondary concerns. In favouring multiple standalone projects – often comically grouped under an afterthought title like "three essays on management" – over the assiduous investigation of a single phenomenon, doctoral students are indoctrinated into salami-slicing their work. It should come as no surprise then, that students complete their theses with the impression that they are a jack of three trades and a master of none.

As students, we often heard that publications acted as currency on the job market. This was a remarkably apt observation: schools of all sizes and renown post carbon-copy announcements soliciting candidates with an "established track record" of research output. After our recruitment, the faculty on our selection committees revealed that they whittled down dozens (if not hundreds) of applications by simply eliminating those without publications or R&Rs in top journals, regardless of other merits. In fact, our experiences on the "inside" of this process generated even more self-doubt regarding the quality of our work compared with other peers who seemed better trained and more confident, sporting prestigious co-authorship and affiliations as badges. We were recruited over them based on achievements within a socially constructed pecking order among journals. Recently, one of us was offered his dream job but could not sleep for days because he was anxious that it had been a mistake; how could he have possibly been preferred over the hordes of US-trained applicants?

As tenure-track faculty, our status, professional mobility and remuneration continue to be nearly fully contingent upon research output. Excellence in pedagogy, academic service or engagement with the business community are promoted but only symbolically valued within our home institutions, beyond which they are openly called "dead ends" or "traps". One of us quickly realized that the only outcome for volunteering to undertake a role nobody else wanted – MSc program director – was that he became a target for mobs of students disgruntled by free-riding colleagues who had preferred to focus on their research rather than on student contact. Given that one academic activity is lauded and incentivized while another is not, the parochial focus of junior academics on research is not that surprising.

Research merit is, in any case, an upwardly moving target owing to increased competition in our field: we tend to view "star-performers" of our field as standard academics. In the sprint towards "A-level" publications and citation counts, we only look at those ahead of us – and of course, there is no shortage of more productive, better cited, and more well-known scholars than ourselves. These comparisons foster self-doubt and more importantly are skewed: well-published colleagues are simply more visible than most scholars and are thus often believed to be the norm. Observing these academics becomes a distorted exercise akin to watching pornography, with questions like "how do they perform like that?" or "how can they be so well-endowed (with publications)?" Those constant upward comparisons are damaging to our sense of self-worth; during the day, we prize rapport with Reviewer 2 over real-world interactions with friends and family. At night, top journal editorial decisions make frequent cameos in dreams and nightmares (depending on whether they are acceptances or rejections, respectively).

Locating management: Where do we fit exactly?

Although the formal and informal induction rituals and mantras in academia certainly contribute to a sense of misalignment, the imposter syndrome also stems from uncertainty regarding the boundaries of our domain. The multidisciplinary character of our field produces turf battles with colleagues from neighbouring social sciences such as sociology, economics or psychology. Despite comparable demands and overlaps in research outlets, faculty from these disciplines often discount the scientific rigor of management research, believing that the business school – as a cash cow for many universities – is a necessary evil to subsidize other faculties, rather than a legitimate source of knowledge and scientific creation. We often come across business school colleagues trained as psychologists or sociologists who are chastised by their classmates for selling out their disciplines to cross over to the "dark side" of business school faculty.

These sorts of occurrences extend to daily life as well. As part of public, multidisciplinary universities, we perceive that business faculties are treated as trade schools that train people to make money rather than conduct research or even contribute to society. A colleague in medical school, for example, genuinely believes that business schools primarily exist to train students for the Certified Public Accountancy exam. One of us experienced substantial delays in obtaining a work visa (and therefore salary) in France for his postdoc, in part because the immigration authorities were unsure of whether his PhD qualified him for the "scientist" permit. The other is frequently asked at family events whether his work counts as "real" research compared with natural sciences or more established social sciences, and whether he got "his PhD in a gift box"[i]. His brother offloads his kids on him, telling him jokingly that he has plenty of "free time" for babysitting. Such experiences are minor but cumulatively unsettling. They lead us to question the value of our profession and status: Was the PhD worth it? Is our research of any use beyond our narrow circles? Are students learning anything of substance from our classes?

Managing the Imposter Syndrome

As we progress in our careers, we have found ways to better align our work with the expectations of our audiences, which helps us alleviate our feelings of imposterhood. We have both sought to publish in disciplinary journals like sociology, psychology and political science, to underscore the amphibian nature of management and improve the legitimacy of our research among colleagues in more established social sciences. We strive to engage with the business community through consulting roles and demonstrate the value-added of rigorous research. In doing so we find the confidence to teach even in classrooms full of executives with decades of experience.

We also engage in public outlets like newspapers and magazines or on social media platforms, forcing us to communicate our work in layman's terms. The risk is that we become known more for media presence than for academic work – one of us was labelled as the academic Beyoncé just before giving a research seminar because of his Twitter followership. Flattering comparisons to divas aside, the exercise of being a publicly engaged individual permits us to convey the merits of management research to broader audiences.

However, these acts are taken of our own volition, and are not necessarily rewarded or encouraged by our home institutions; we are worried about the real trade-off between focusing on publishing and broadening the impact of our work. As such, the prevalence of the imposter syndrome signals the need for more structural changes in business schools and management academia. We proceed to examine what these changes might look like, beginning with the doctoral program.

Creating new mantras for junior management academics

Breaking free from the supervisor-student dyad

In many ways, the induction of PhD students follows the model of a Jedi apprenticeship – a tough master training clueless students to continue his/her tradition. In contrast, we were lucky enough to have supervisors that granted us the liberty to wander intellectually and develop a unique identity as scholars. As faculty members, this has helped us alleviate our anxiety to an extent, as we feel no obligation to carry someone else's mantle. We note, however, that many recent recruits are apprentices of senior scholars: although the former quickly became experts in the domain of the latter, they sacrificed reflexivity and agency regarding the ontological premises of their research (as well as the possibility of alternative worldviews). This model undoubtedly provided rapid returns for both supervisor and student, although the limitations became apparent after the defence: these colleagues are now faltering without hands-on mentorship, questioning whether they are faulty facsimiles of their advisers.

We make the point that students and junior scholars need not rely primarily on the instruction of one senior colleague but keep an "open relationship", multiplying collaborations and engagement with a broader range of academics. Breaking free from the master-padawan relationship helps junior academics respect their own ideas rather than seeking "what will get them published". A few years out of the PhD, we now recognize that we were infected by the curiosity and self-efficacy of our advisors; the expected output was secondary to intrinsic motivation and the assiduous exploration of a phenomenon.

Such collaboration should also extend outside of departments and schools. During our doctoral programs we were fortunate enough to be exposed to a multitude of research paradigms through courses in economics, psychology, sociology and epistemology but also through diverse research projects with multiple faculty. This fostered the recognition of paradigms divergent from our own, a necessary pre-condition for engaging with different audiences. Now, as researchers, we are most excited about projects where we rope in concepts from outside domains like media studies or biology. We seek to encourage the same approach to academic training in our own institutions, especially when we see many recent graduates floundering without the oversight of their supervisor. We believe that network and competence building produce long-term resilience and inoculates against the imposter syndrome that stems from a one-to-one apprenticeship. Effectively, we push students to become hybrids of different research strains rather than clones of predecessors, and more importantly to appreciate the intrinsic value of their work rather than the recognition it gets them.

Making field-work compulsory

We note in recent years a welcome shift of PhD programs orienting themselves around phenomenological rather than theoretical foci. Newer journals, such as Academy of Management Discoveries are attempting to address the legitimacy crisis our field is facing. It is heartening to observe newer generations of PhD students become less risk averse and more eager to tackle “grand challenges” such as climate change, income inequality, migration or artificial intelligence. Editors have started to provide roadmaps to tackle these important topics (George, et al. 2016), although publishing in top-tier outlets is often a risky proposition due to data-related challenges. Nonetheless, students express to us that they find meaning in addressing concerns of practical relevance, where entering the tunnel does not first necessitate diving into the theory cave. To these students, academia generates theories to understand problems rather than the converse. Not coincidentally, these students are noticeably more selfassured and motivated than their peers and less likely, we find, to suffer from feelings of imposterhood.

We recognize that published (or publishable) articles offer a measurable signal of quality on the job market compared with monographs, but the two are not mutually exclusive formats: articles can and should be organized as sequential chapters within a larger treatise. One of us found that a fruitful way to ensure consistency in his dissertation was to frame it as a “special issue”, where the three articles were organized around a specific theme, context, and/or method. He felt legitimated when he won an award in a dissertation contest, where judges lauded the “coherence” of the work. Such accolades (including the Grigor McClelland award) not only offer strong incentives for students to reflect upon the integrity of their dissertation, but also provide external validation for those susceptible to the imposter syndrome.

For faculty, we offer a related suggestion: making field-work compulsory. The sabbatical system in most academic institutions offers a good opportunity to dedicate time outside the ivory tower to experience “what’s out there”. Such experiential sabbaticals were far more common a few decades ago when management scholarship was less obsessed with outputs: faculty would, for instance, engage in consulting for a year to gain practical experience but also diffuse the conceptual and analytical skills accumulated in preceding years. As junior scholars juggling academic duties, we find that feelings of imposterhood become more pronounced as we experience distance, physical and temporal, from managerially relevant phenomena and the practical implications of our areas of expertise.

Accordingly, we have both recently gone back into the field to engage with grand challenges (refugees and minorities in one case and urban impoverishment in the other). As Chowdhury

(2017) vividly recounts, such work is oftentimes grinding and heart-breaking but also profoundly inspiring and self-affirming. Unlike the data collection during our PhD, though, we are now more cognizant of our added value: the cross-disciplinary character of our training is proving especially useful for tackling grand challenges from multiple conceptual angles and is crucial for the construction of comprehensive solutions. We find the work to be therapeutic and effective at eroding the imposter syndrome: we collaborate with researchers from neighbouring social sciences, we gather anecdotes for pedagogical use, and we are reminded that we became academics to solve problems.

Our final suggestion is clichéd but necessary to repeat: higher education establishments need to change their incentive systems. Scholars need to be encouraged to act less as mercenaries and more as public intellectuals, loyal to institutions that promote and cherish a holistic contribution. Beyond incentives, we also believe that collegial supportiveness is pivotal. Junior academics need encouragement that what they do matters beyond the number of their publications; collectively, we need to build a culture of indulgence and benevolence in academia. These formal and informal support systems may allow anxious academics to overcome the imposter syndrome and recognize the value in both their professions and themselves.

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[i] see De Vaujany (2016) for a guide on how to explain academic work at a family dinner

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