


Surviving Impostor Syndrome: Navigating Through the Mental Roller Coaster of a Doctoral Sojourn

Siti Masrifatul Fitriyah 
University of Jember

ABSTRACT

Studying overseas may offer myriad riches of extraordinary experiences, especially due to the opportunities to immerse into a different academic culture. However, for some, the difference may be a hurdle that brings them into a mental roller coaster along with their academic career. In this reflective paper, against the backdrop of my overseas studies experiences, I recount my bumpy journey of battling the so-called impostor syndrome which prevented me from being productive until I found the lights at the end of the tunnel and finally found a way to move on with my journey and earned my degree. Self-appreciation and community support seemed to be the most important influences that may have led me to be free from the syndrome and to finally achieve my main objectives.

Keywords: community support, impostor syndrome, mental health, reflection, self-appreciation

Studying in an overseas university, of which academic and social culture may be different from where the students come from, can often carry along with them challenges during the adjustment process in the early stages or in the later phases of their study. Sharing her experiences of such a journey, Palmer (2015) pinpointed how her original academic and social culture differed dramatically from what her overseas university experience offered, which then led her to feel like an outsider. What I experienced during my overseas studies may reflect Palmer's experiences. I pursued my doctoral study in the same overseas university where I obtained my Master's degree. Hence, when starting my doctoral study, I

have known most of my lecturers and some of my colleagues and was already familiar with the atmosphere and most of the places in the university. However, being an international student, I also often experienced the feeling of being an outsider and of whether I could be on par with those coming from all different countries.

I wrote this piece of reflective article against the backdrop of my experiences of studying for my doctoral degree in one of the universities in the Midwest of England. Originating from Indonesia, a country in Southeast Asia where English is a foreign language (Kachru, 1990), I often wondered if I could express myself either in writing or in oral presentations in high-quality academic English. The fear of presenting a piece of academic work in unusual or eccentric English to my supervisors, members of audience in conferences, or even my fellow doctoral students in my university kept emerging from time to time. In addition, my perceived differences in the academic culture of the university from that of in my country could have exacerbated the situation. Along my study journey, I battled with a lot of feelings of insecurity, especially the feeling that I was behind everybody else and that everybody else seemed to have better knowledge, better English, better academic writing skills, and better progress in their studies than I did.

My first year ran somewhat more smoothly, as I probably was still in the honeymoon period (Black & Mendenhall, 1991; Schartner & Young, 2015), a phase in my doctoral study when I enjoyed my return to the university immensely. The feeling of becoming an impostor started to show up in my second year, where I felt that everybody seemed to progress much better in their research, draft writing, and their studies than I did. For instance, I knew a couple of colleagues who had published their papers in reputable journals in the early phase of their doctoral study. Being able to publish in a reputable journal is a great achievement in my home country, where the ‘publish or perish’ culture is getting stronger over these recent years, especially for members of academia like me. Even at that time, my government offered a generous amount of reward for those who can publish their articles in reputable journals. Another example was when I knew that one of my colleagues had finished analyzing his data while I was still struggling with recruiting my participants for my research. This made me worried and kept thinking whether I was on track or was left far behind. These feelings made me struggle to continue with my research and to write my draft. There were times when I was even unable to write a single line despite spending the whole day in front of the computer trying to focus and be productive. This happened for about one term, the whole four months, until one of my colleagues shared her apparently similar feelings with me. That was when I realized that I needed help to cope with these potentially unhealthy feelings.

IMPOSTOR SYNDROME: DO NOT SUFFER IN SILENCE

After some time searching, my colleague and I found a workshop session on mental well-being offered by the students’ training center in my university. One of the speakers in the workshop brought up a topic about ‘impostor syndrome,’ and I was in a state of awe when I heard about this term, and I knew instantly that

it was probably what my colleague and I were suffering from. Herrmann (2016) defined impostor syndrome as a feeling that one is not on par with their colleagues in terms of their achievements, intelligence, and that they do not deserve to be in their current position. Those with impostor syndrome often consider that they achieve ‘an esteemed position’ mainly due to some ‘stroke of luck’ and not due to their competencies (Feenstra et al., 2020). They often fail to acknowledge their achievements and often think that these are due to ‘a lowering of standards, timing of opportunities, or personal charm’ (Sverdlik et al., 2018), or due to the help of others, or merely coincidental; meanwhile, they would easily acknowledge their failure as a sign of their perceived ‘professional inadequacy’ (Bravata et al., 2020).

Wang et al. (2019) believed that this syndrome relates to perfectionism and ‘fully mediated the link between perfectionism and anxiety.’ These were what could have happened to me. I remember that I was almost always reluctant to submit my assignments or other works before giving them extra-careful repeated checks, as I was worried that there could be errors in my work. I would usually wait until the last minute to submit my work when I thought that nothing else I could do with them to make them more ‘perfect’. When the first time I encountered the term impostor syndrome, I was a little relieved, because I then knew what actually may have happened to me. My colleague jokingly said to me that ‘if it has a scientific name and many people suffer from it then we should be just “fine”.’ However, we knew exactly that we were far from being fine. With that realization, I decided that I needed to seek help to free me from the snare of the syndrome.

THE LIGHTS BY THE END OF THE TUNNEL

Self-appreciation

After the realization, I started to reflect on what might be the cause of my impostor syndrome. The first thing that I realized was that I did not give myself sufficient appreciation that I should have deserved. I did not take into account my progress and often compared my achievements with those of my colleagues. I remember how I was intimidated when a colleague finished his data analysis when I, and apparently majority of my colleagues, were still on the data generation stage or when a colleague got their works published. I forgot to put into account how I succeeded to pass my first-year viva without a lot of revisions, or how I got positive responses when I presented my works at conferences. The first-year viva can be a daunting experience for all doctoral students in the United Kingdom as this is the first hurdle that the students have to go through in order to be allowed to continue their studies. In this oral examination, doctoral students are required to present their research proposal to a group of panel examiners who will then decide whether the students need to make some minor changes in their proposal, to rewrite their proposal, or to be considered incompetent to continue the study. The viva is a crucial milestone for the students as this is the first ‘break or make’

moment and the gate to the actual doctoral student status. Therefore, passing this exam can be an achievement that merits a celebration.

On reflection, I started to realize that everybody had their own pace and also their own challenges. Pursuing a degree is not a race against anyone; it is a race against myself. Hence, I needed to focus on my own goals. As the old saying in my culture, I needed to put on horse blinkers and stay focused when working. In my culture, horses are adorned with blinkers to prevent them from getting distracted and to ensure that they move straight forward. Therefore, when deciding to wear the figurative horse blinkers, I decided to focus on what I aimed to achieve and to avoid comparing myself with others which could be a distraction for me. I also decided to allow myself to be more grateful with every single even so little progress that I make which apparently helped me feel more relieved. This realization helped me immensely to bring my thinking back to work and reduce the level of exhaustion, especially the emotional exhaustion and cynicism which Villwock et al. (2016) mentioned as the impacts of impostor syndrome. Being more self-appreciative allowed me to have better 'positive appraisal of' my values which has protected me against negative influences, to think more positively (Mann et al., 2004) and to eventually improve my mental well-being.

Community Support

We could easily assume that a doctorate study could be a lonely journey, as every other student was busy with thinking about their own research. However, that is not always true. I remember in one of my supervision meetings, my supervisor reminded me not to suffer in silence and that I needed to immediately seek help if I needed one. With that in mind, I started to return to the postgraduate research student network meetings, which I avoided to attend for some time, as I was afraid that I might be discouraged when knowing my colleagues progressed better than I did. Then, I realized how supportive my colleagues were and how everyone had their own problems and battles. It was not that I was happy that everyone may have challenges, I sympathized my colleagues for the problems that they might have, and I believe that my colleagues shared mutual feelings with me. However, people with impostor syndrome, like myself, often over-estimate what others are capable of doing, and underestimate the relentless endeavors of those other people to gain their achievements (Parkman, 2016). I often focused more on what my colleagues had achieved and took little notice of the painstaking efforts they may have done for those achievements.

Our forums always served as a safe zone for us to share our academic work and to seek help for our problems, either academic, social, or psychological. A supportive environment is crucial to help those with impostor syndrome usually linked to low self-esteem; thus, providing constructive feedback instead of criticism will be helpful in this regard (Wang et al., 2019). That was what I felt the doctoral network forum offered: a supportive and comforting environment. With that being said, I ended up co-writing and co-publishing an article with some of my colleagues from the network and when writing this paper, I was on the way to submit another manuscript that I worked with another group of colleagues, also

from the network. I remember what Forsdale (1981) highlighted that everyone is ‘an island’ separated from others, and ‘forever physically separated after the umbilical cord is cut’; however, the feelings of anxiousness and desolation urge us to ‘create bridges between our islands’ so that we can connect with others. Being part of the supportive community helped me immensely and was one of the comforting remedies that helped me reduce my feelings of insecurity. This has helped me feel ‘valued, involved’ and being an ‘integral part’ of the academic community which then helped me feel that I am part of the academia (Sverdlik et al., 2020).

After all those realizations, from time to time, the impostor syndrome seemed to reoccur and I felt down again. However, I knew what to do then, i.e., to be thankful for every single progress that I made and also to be thankful for being part of the supportive community. With self-care and appreciation and ample support from my community, finally I found the lights by the end of the tunnel, which eventually led me to finish my doctoral study and to earn my degree.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This work has not been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of my home university as it does not involve any other participants other than myself. However, to ensure ethicality, I anonymize the names and places that come up in this reflective account.

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SITI MASRIFATUL FITRIYAH, PhD is a lecturer in Education at the Department of Language and Arts Education, Jember University, Indonesia. Her major research interests include narrative inquiry, language policy, teacher education, bilingual education, and researching multilingually. Email: s.fitriyah@unej.ac.id/ fitrikurn77@gmail.com.
