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Imposter Syndrome and the Accidental Academic: An Autoethnographic Account

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Imposter Syndrome and the Accidental Academic: An Autoethnographic Account

In this paper I use an autoethnographic approach to explore my everyday experiences as an early career lecturer at a UK-based university. I uncover some of my underlying experiences of Imposter Syndrome, presenting the ways Imposter Syndrome manifests in my teaching activities. This paper recommends areas in which Higher Education Institutions can offer support to early career academics, for instance through mentoring/training in: dealing with nerves; classroom behaviour management; and dressing for confidence. An unexpected finding to emerge from this study is the potential therapeutic role of keeping a diary for early career lecturers struggling with self-doubt.

Keywords: autoethnography; imposter syndrome; lecturer; qualitative

Introduction

I never intended to be an academic. After I finished my A Levels, I ventured to university to study a degree in Fashion Brand Management, and aspired to be a fashion journalist. Fast-forward ten years and I am now employed as a Senior Lecturer in Education[1]. In this paper I draw on data collected through autoethnographic research undertaken at my

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[1] For those interested in how this transition occurred, my 'imposter' self would state that it is down to luck (see Clance & Imes, 1978). However, in reality, it had a lot to do with the timing of opportunities and taking risks - applying for positions that I thought could benefit from my creative background. I undertook an MSc in Marketing Management, a PhD in Environmental Sciences, and then a Postdoctoral Research Associate position in Education. My interdisciplinary background, although somewhat haphazard, accidental and unintentional, has served me well in my career thus far.

former institution, Edge Hill University, UK, where I was employed as a Lecturer in Children, Young People and Families in the Faculty of Health and Social Care. There has been an emphasis on understanding teachers' thinking from their perspective as an insider looking around, as opposed to an outsider looking in (Muchmore, 2002). As a neophyte lecturer (Morton, 2009), being 1.5 years in post at the time of undertaking the research, but also an 'accidental academic' (Wright, 2016, p. 426), in this paper I present a self-study which uncovers some of my underlying experiences of Imposter Syndrome as manifested through my teaching activities.

This self-study adopts traditions from autoethnography. I hope to be able to translate this autoethnographic qualitative research into a pedagogical method for teaching. Thus, following Pennington (2007, p. 96), I use the term 'autoethnographic pedagogy' to describe how I used autoethnographic traditions to 'put the self [back] into teaching and learning'. The overarching aim of the project from which this paper emerged was to explore my everyday experiences as an early career lecturer and how I navigate my feelings of being an imposter.

Imposter Syndrome is a term coined in 1978 by psychologists Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes. It refers to a psychological phenomenon characterised by intense feelings of intellectual fraudulence (Clance & Imes, 1978). Imposter Syndrome suggests that you believe your success was down to luck and that soon your lack of ability will be exposed (Clance & Imes, 1978). Pressures of perfectionism; increasing social comparisons; and a fear of failure are all suggested to contribute to Imposter Syndrome (Sakulku, 2011). Imposter Syndrome has been well documented in the academy, ranging from research studying the incidence and impact of the phenomenon (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017;

Parkman, 2016), to a focus on Imposter Syndrome as related to doctoral students (Craddock et al., 2011); and teaching evaluations (Brems et al., 1994). To my knowledge, this is the first study to use an autoethnographic approach to focus on the lived experiences of Imposter Syndrome for one lecturer.

The importance of Imposter Syndrome as a focus of research is clear when considering that such imposter feelings can lead an individual to experience increased levels of stress, burnout and decreased job performance and job satisfaction over time (Whitman & Shanine, 2012). Anderson (2016) has questioned whether Imposter Syndrome is real, and downplayed it as a normal part of experiencing success. However, Haney (2015) believes, and I agree, that Imposter Syndrome is very much real, and that it is important to unlock the fear of being successful before such self-doubt prevents individuals from reaching their full potential. Having defined Imposter Syndrome, this paper now turns to outline the methodology employed in this project. From this, the results of the research are presented, followed by a discussion, including recommendations for Higher Educations Institutions (HEIs) to support employees experiencing Imposter Syndrome. The paper concludes by outlining potential future areas of research interest.

Materials and methods

This is a qualitative study which uses the methodology that adopts from the traditions of autoethnography. Other self-studies into teaching practice have employed an autoethnographic approach (Brooks & Thompson, 2015; Gardner & Lane, 2010; Harrison, 2012; Muchmore, 2002; Starr, 2010; Wilkinson, 2019). As self-reflexive inquiry, autoethnography can be used to recall, retell and reveal bodily embodiment (Allbon, 2012). The process of autoethnography combines characteristics of ethnography

and autobiography that allows for individuals to explore cultural understanding through self-observation which results in individual narratives (Chang, 2008).

Autoethnography enables us to 'open us to the possibility of seeing more of what we might ignore in both ourselves and others, asking why it is ignored, and what we might need to do about it' (Dauphinee, 2010, p. 818). Through this autoethnographic account, I offer a thick description (Geertz, 1973) of the lived experiences of Imposter Syndrome in my everyday life as a lecturer. This autoethnographic approach allows me to question and challenge the philosophical underpinnings of the learning and teaching practices that I promote as a lecturer (see also Trahar, 2013), and how Imposter Syndrome potentially shapes and constrains these. Like other types of qualitative research, the results of this study are not generalisable, nor are they intended to be (Wright, 2016). Following Ellis (2004, p. 124), validity/trustworthiness are determined by 'what happens to readers…it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable and possible'.

As well as a methodology, autoethnography can be seen as a transformative research method (Custer, 2014). Precisely, autoethnography has been heralded as transformative because it 'changes time, requires vulnerability, fosters empathy, embodies creativity and innovation, eliminates boundaries, honors subjectivity, and provides therapeutic benefits' (Custer, 2014, p. 11). I am drawn to the notions of reflective practice as a means of representing and reflecting on the pedagogy of my role (see also Harrison, 2012; Zhao, 2003). I argue that autoethnography is a valid methodology through which to achieve this and follow Hughes, Pennington and Makris (2012, p. 209) in urging researchers to pursue

a 'deeper understanding of and widened respect for autoethnography's capacity as an empirical endeavour'.

Over a period of four months (January 2018-May 2018) I recorded observations, thoughts, feelings and interactions of my everyday experiences of lecturing in a personal research diary (Dewalt & Dewalt, 2002). In particular, I reflected on my experiences of teaching *Communication Skills*, a first year second semester module. The sessions for this module were delivered one day per week, in a three hour lecture. In my field diary, I was concerned with the ordinary, banal everydayness of events and interactions, paying attention to taken-for-granted practices as an early career lecturer, and how Imposter Syndrome may shape these. Travers (2011) promotes the usefulness of diaries for creating a narrative of events, thoughts, hopes and emotions, whilst Crang (2003, p. 501) positions diaries as useful for eliciting the 'felt, touched and embodied constitution of knowledge'. My diary contained subjective accounts that I reflected upon periodically in relation to my own values, perspectives and my self-belief in teaching and learning (see Trahar, 2013). I chose to handwrite rather than type diary entries as I associate typing with academic writing. Therefore, I feared that when using a computer I would deliberate about my notes too much, allowing for a process of immediate editing, as opposed to writing how I felt at that moment. I completed diary entries as soon as possible after each teaching session, and always within five hours to ensure that I could recall events vividly. Often, I completed the diary in advance of teaching sessions, documenting my feelings and emotions.

Data analysis

I adopted a thematic approach to analysing the data. I analysed the data by hand as I believed this would facilitate greater closeness to the data, considering this 'human as analyst' (Robson, 2011, p. 463) stance important due to the autoethnographic nature of my study (whereby 'the Self of the researcher is integrated into the research', Woods, 1996, p. 51). In line with Mauthner and Doucet (2003), reflexivity is important at the interpretation stage of the research. For, as Taylor and Bogdan (1998) argue, as researchers we draw on our first-hand experience with the research setting to make sense of our data.

After reading through my data set multiple times, I separated the data into smaller, significant parts. I labelled each of these smaller parts with a code, and then compared each new segment of data with the previous codes that emerged. This ensured that similar data were labelled with the same code. I dismissed any preconceived data categories and loosened the initial focus of the study in an effort to 'generate as many codes as possible' (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995, p. 152). I used memos to comment on parts of my diary which intrigued me, or that I considered particularly important. MacLure (2008, p. 174) speaks of the pleasure derived from manual analysis, particularly 'poring over the data, annotating, describing, linking, bringing theory to bear, recalling what others have written, and seeing things from different angles'. Crucially, this enabled me to ask questions about what has emerged through the data. Resultantly, I changed and make linkages between some codes, dropped and added others. Following from this, I undertook a process of abstracting, whereby I condensed the codes into deeper conceptual constructs. I continued this until all coded sections were saturated.

A Note on Ethics

Ethnography requires ethical considerations regarding consent from participants involved in interactions and observations. Since *auto*ethnography is a process of self-exploration and interrogation (Starr, 2010), the real 'participant' is the person undertaking the research (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Thus, though Stacey (1988, p. 23) tells that 'the lives, loves, and tragedies that fieldwork informants share with a researcher are ultimately data, grist for the ethnographic mill', this autoethnography involves me reflecting on *me* and *my* experiences.

Despite this focus on self, relational ethics is an emergent area of attention for autoethnographers (see Ellis, 2007). Relational ethics is important because, 'in the process of writing about ourselves, we also write about others' (Sparkes, 2013, p. 207). In order to ensure confidentiality, any colleagues and students featured as characters in an entry are referred to as 'staff member' or 'student' only. In anonymising students and staff members, I am cognisant to these relational responsibilities to the individuals who are caught up in this autoethnography (see Hernandez & Ngunjiri, 2013). I have not anonymised the institution I was teaching at, Edge Hill University, nor have I anonymised the faculty, since this information could be easily obtained from a quick internet search for my name. Further, in order to tell a convincing story, I may have to disclose some information which may lead the university to be identified. An example of this is the work of Stevens (2007), who anonymised the site of his fieldwork, naming it 'the College'. However, reviewers figured out that Stevens (2007) conducted the fieldwork at his own institution due to information about the college's admission figures and admission requirements (see Jaschik, 2007).

Autoethnography involves disclosing information that some may consider too controversial for publication (see Blackman, 2007 on ethnography). As such, there may be concerns about me disclosing thoughts/feelings/actions that may compromise my position as lecturer, and the respect given to me by students if they access the published paper. Denshire (2014) documents this concern as opening out a professional's life, reconfiguring power relations in the process. It has been argued that autoethnographers writing within/against their profession may destabilise relationships between colleagues (Denshire, 2014; Reed Danahay, 2003) and there is risk of self-harm to the researcher (Tolich, 2010). However, I believe this is part and parcel of autoethnographic practice, whereby the researcher will 'strip away the veneer of self-protection that comes with professional title and position … to make themselves accountable and vulnerable to the public' (Denzin, 2003, p. 137). It is this viewpoint that led Custer (2014, p. 3) to argue that autoethnography 'can promote vulnerability, nakedness, and shame'. Rather than considering this 'risky' (Brogden, 2010), I prefer to see autoethnography in the same way as Peseta (2005), as providing an opportunity for scholars interested in sharing accounts of professional practice that acknowledge the very human-ness to the work. This approach is particularly important considering the somewhat misunderstood topic of Imposter Syndrome.

Results

The data reveal three predominant themes: nervousness; classroom behaviour management; and identity and appearance. I discuss each of these themes, respectively, herein.

Nervousness

Many of my field diary entries revolved around the theme of nervousness. Most feelings of nervousness relate to the possibility of being uncovered as a fraud (Clance & Imes, 1978); as such, nervousness is a recurring theme in the Imposter Syndrome literature (e.g. Coryell et al., 2013; Mirra & Wescott, 2018; Overall, 1997). In the below field diary I recount how nervousness stemming from my Imposter Syndrome resulted in lack of sleep:

> I did not sleep well at all last night as I was worried about this morning's lecture. I must have had 3 hours' sleep maximum. Once I was awake, I worried more about how my lack of sleep would affect my lecturing performance. My nerves only stopped at the end of the three hour lecture, when I was so relieved and happy that it was over. I love teaching, but I hate how nervous I get about teaching. Sometimes I wonder if the nerves are unhealthy and if it is sustainable to be consumed with such nerves throughout my career.
>
> (Author's field diary, 16/01/2018)

From the field diary excerpt, it is clear that my self-doubt manifested into nervousness, which results in sleep deprivation. This is important, as a lack of sleep can lead to a lack of energy (resulting, for instance, in a monotonous voice and unstimulating presentation of information), meaning that lectures delivered are not as effective for student learning as they could be (Exley and Dennick, 2009). Another manifestation of nervousness evident in my field diary was 'freezing' in the classroom:

> When I entered the classroom I stood at the front and loaded up my PowerPoint presentation. I had every intention of walking about the classroom, trying to be an

'animated' lecturer. However, despite my good intentions, when I came to start talking I found myself stuck to the same spot, and physically unable to move. I was immobile.

(Author's field diary, 17/04/2018)

While most student feedback within the faculty has found that students favour animated lecturers – in the above field diary entry I document a fear that I could not fulfil this role due to the immobilising nature of my nerves. Stage fright can be directly related to Imposter Syndrome, as it involves concerns about an individual's ability to deliver a performance convincingly (Marshall, 1994) and fear of being 'outed' for one's perceived incompetence (Scott, 2007a). The above field diary entry was not the only instance of stage fright, and such narratives permeated my diary entries. Stage fright and performance anxiety have been documented in previous literature concerning university lecturers (see Scott, 2007b).

Another physical manifestation of nerves was a rash that I developed on my face and neck:

Today a student asked me in a lecture "do you have an allergy?", I was confused and replied 'no?' and she said "you're all blotchy and your eyes are bloodshot". During the break I rushed to the bathroom and saw that my neck and face were mottled red. It was the same rash I get when I present at conferences, and for me represents a physical manifestation of self-doubt and fear of being outed as an imposter ... I feel relieved offloading this here [in the diary].

(Author's field diary, 13/03/2018)

It is clear that my Imposter Syndrome is emotionally unsettling (see also Hutchins, 2015), but it has visible manifestations too. This 'nervous rash' is not unique to me and has been documented in older literature reviewing teacher stress (see Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1977) and more recent literature on women in higher education (Brabazon, 2014). Interesting to emerge from analysis of my field diary was that, through using the diary to record autoethnographic entries, I found solace in keeping this diary. This can be seen in the above field diary entry when I state 'I feel relieved offloading this here'. I used the diary to 'work through' my nerves ahead of teaching, and to 'offload' after teaching.

Classroom Behaviour Management

A further theme to arise within my field diary was that of classroom behaviour management. Throughout my lectures there were occasions where I had to deal with students who disengaged from my sessions, for instance by playing on their mobiles phones or talking whilst I, or their peers, were talking. While it has long been documented that lecturing requires the teacher to take on an authoritative role (Heron, 1989), this was something that I struggled with. Take the following field diary excerpt:

> The same group of students were talking again. I tried all of the 'text book' approaches to try and stop them from talking. I went silent, hoping that they would somehow hear this silence and stop talking. I also tried the approach of verbally asking the students to be quiet. However, the talking persisted almost the entire way through the three hour lecture. I erupted, asking the students if they would be so disrespectful if the programme leader was teaching them.
>
> (Author's field diary, 13/02/2018)

In the above field diary entry, I discuss trialling a number of approaches to gain control over the classroom. There are a vast range of methods for managing undesirable student behaviour presented in the literature, including for instance humour (Powell & Andresen, 1985). However, there is no university-wide policy at EHU for classroom behaviour management. I can be seen to query this lack of policy in the field diary entry below:

I always think it is odd that nobody advises you how to 'tell off' students at university, and I am left wondering what is and is not within my rights. After all, these are adults I am teaching, not children. But should there not be a university-wide policy? If I send students out of my class for talking, but another lecturer just 'tells them off' I have no backing or support.

(Author's field diary, 09/01/2018)

The above field diary entries contain trigger events that led me to question my legitimacy as a lecturer. It is clear that I am confused regarding how to manage low level behaviour in the classroom. Part of this stems from my lack of confidence and belief in myself as an authority figure, and also an absence of training in how to manage such situations. This lack of specific training is worrying when considering research has found that student misbehaviour negatively affects teacher stress, wellbeing, and confidence (e.g. Merrett & Wheldall, 1993), and also has detrimental impacts on student learning and academic achievements (e.g. Poulou & Norwich, 2000). Given this, it is important to identify ways to support lecturers who may be struggling to manage classroom behaviour effectively.

Identity and Appearance

Analysis of my field diary revealed identity and appearance as a key issue. See the field diary excerpt below:

I am lecturing at 9am tomorrow, so I am doing my usual thing of deciding what to wear. When I first got the job as 'lecturer' I anticipated that I would dress smartly, and try to 'look like an adult', but for me it is more important to just be comfortable to help me feel more confident. For this reason, I will opt for my usual outfit choice of jeans and a jumper.

(Author's field diary, 16/01/2018)

Above, I discuss how I plan my outfit for each teaching session. This can be seen as a 'backstage rehearsal' (Scott, 2007b), or dress rehearsal specifically, used as a device to manage my teaching-related anxiety. Just like lecturers in Scott's (2007b) research, it is true that I had specific 'lecture shoes' or 'lecture trousers'. However, my decision of how to dress was not only informed by what made me feel comfortable, but also how other people viewed me:

I was deciding what to wear for tomorrow's lecture when I thought back on a comment made to me in the canteen this morning. I was buying my morning coffee and the staff member said that her and her colleague had been trying to work out whether I was a staff member of student. I told her I was a lecturer, and she looked quite taken aback, saying that I look very young. I am aware that I look young, and am often mistaken for a student. This is somewhat more evident as many of the students I teach are mature students, and one student even told me that she has a daughter my age, so finds it 'odd' that I am 'stood up the front talking'.

(Author's field diary, 13/02/2018)

When choosing my outfit to wear for this morning's lecture, I reflected on the comment made by the student questioning if I had an allergy (because of my nervous rash). I decided to wear a high neck top and a scarf to try to have less flesh on show that could be commented on.

(Author's field diary, 20/03/2018)

Whilst I am a relatively young lecturer (27 years old at the time of commencing this research), I look much younger than this still. In the first field diary entry above, my awareness of my young-looking appearance led to decisions about how to dress in a way that distinguished me from students. In the second diary entry I attempt to dress in a way as to conceal my 'nervous rash'. This relates to literature regarding different strategies for coping with teaching-related anxiety, in which some lecturers confess to 'dressing up' (Scott, 2007b). Further, my findings concur with those of Scott (2007b), that wearing the 'costume' of a lecturer is an important part of the mental preparations to reduce feelings of performance anxiety.

Discussion

'Imposter syndrome' is a phrase that is used casually, and sometimes almost comedically, amongst academics at HEIs. Indeed, it is sometimes downplayed and presented as something 'we all have' at some point in time (Anderson, 2016). However, the underlying implications of Imposter Syndrome including sleepless nights and stage fright, as I have recounted in this paper, are not, and should not be considered comedic or 'a fact of life', and should be addressed. Herein, I present some recommendations. I wish to emphasise that these relate to things that would have helped me to address the issues I identified

throughout this paper. I invite readers to reflect on these, (dis)agree with them, or be intrigued enough to carry out their own (auto)ethnographic studies.

The findings in this study revolved around three main themes: nervousness; classroom behaviour management; and identity and appearance. Coaching and support offered by HEIs, or specifically by mentors, in each of these areas would be beneficial, not only for professional development, but also for lecturer wellbeing. The importance of this is clear when considering Freese's (2006) argument that the emergent 'teaching self' is shaped by the institutional culture in which an individual works. Putting mentoring in place to offer advice to lecturers, particularly on aspects of dealing with nerves and classroom behaviour management could be useful, not only for improving practice, but also improving student experience. As noted within this paper, this is particularly important when considering feedback received at faculty level that confident and animated lecturers rate higher in student evaluations. Further, training on effective classroom behaviour management principles could help to reduce lecturer stress and therefore increase student learning opportunities (Clunies-Ross, Little and Kienhuis, 2008). Moreover, I have noted that no guidance was offered to me about how to dress once I was in post (this is in contrast to the abundance of information available through career advice services regarding how to dress for an interview). This is a further area where guidance could be useful for new lecturers; such training content could focus on strategies of self-presentation and dressing for confidence. The recommended training could be a valuable addition to the induction process for new lecturers. Whilst I would not at all wish to diminish the 'academic freedom' surrounding how academics dress (no dress code or uniform), I highlight this guidance as something that would have been useful for me and invite readers to reflect on whether they would also find this useful.

Emerging from this study, the field diary, used as a methodological tool, became a 'friend to confide in'. In part, this is because the journaling process evokes conversations with self (Hiemstra, 2001), and can therefore be considered cathartic (Travers, 2011). Indeed, I used my diary as a space to divulge and to help me 'work through' my nerves. The content of the diary revealed that the process of keeping the diary regularly may help in the management of stress and emotions. In particular, I found it useful to look back on specific days or weeks in order to unlock and resolve my personal feelings and to address imposter thoughts. Travers (2011), too, has noted the importance of keeping a reflective diary for exploring the lived experiences of stress and coping. Given the solace I found in keeping a field diary, I would recommend this as a tool for other lecturers who may be struggling to control their nerves and / or experiencing self-doubt.

Conclusion

Using an autoethnographic approach, through this paper I have offered an account of professional practice of an early career academic at a UK HEI, whilst acknowledging the very human-ness to the work of a lecturer. Through the honest and reflexive account I have shared, I hope that academics and university support services start to take Imposter Syndrome seriously, and that training or mentoring is put in place to help those experiencing Imposter Syndrome. As noted in the Introduction, I hope to be able to translate this autoethnographic qualitative research study into a pedagogical method for teaching. This describes how I will use this autoethnography to 'put the self [back] into teaching and learning'. Following Freese (2006), reflecting on my practice has enabled me to discover my 'teacher self'. Further, through reflecting on my feelings and emotions, I feel better able to manage these and to channel these into the teaching experience.

This study has considered how Imposter Syndrome manifests into my teaching experience. The experiences I recount in this paper could be exemplary of other individual's experiences. Providing this honest discussion could in itself be valuable when considering that the culture of universities may make it difficult to openly discuss Imposter Syndrome, p4which may mean people experiencing it suffer in isolation (Zorn, 2005). Future work could consider the implications of Imposter Syndrome on the assessment process, including marking and moderation.

Declaration of interest statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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