Faking It: Women, Academia, and Impostor Syndrome

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Impostor syndrome—the feeling that, regardless of your accomplishments, you're still about to be unmasked as a fraud—is an all-too-common affliction among academics. Ironically, it's the successful who tend to suffer from it: In order to feel like you're faking it, you need to have already reached a certain level in your discipline. Think of it as a twisted version of the Socratic paradox—the more you know, the more you feel like you know nothing.

We've been talking about this phenomenon, and its consequences, for a while. The term itself, in fact, dates back to 1978—when a pair of psychologists, writing in *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, and Practice,* identified "the impostor phenomenon in high-achieving women."

The topic is telling. While both men and women experience impostor syndrome, women are far more susceptible. Given the messages of inadequacy that many women have internalized throughout their lives, it's hardly surprising that many of us are wondering if we can hack it. Recently, I read Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In*. Instead of coming away feeling inspired, I felt unnerved: "Can I really do all of this? Can I be a successful professional woman?" Images of those hyper-successful and well-rounded women who have succeeded can make the rest of us moderately-successful women feel inadequate.

What's alarming is that the more education and professional skills women acquire, the less confident we seem to feel. Witness a recent survey of undergraduates at Boston College, which showed that female students finished college with lower self-esteem than they started with. Male students, on the other hand, graduated with greater self-confidence (albeit lower GPAs) than their female peers.

What's to blame for that divergence? The survey's findings point to "the pressure to look or dress a certain way" and "the hookup culture" as major contributors. Which makes sense: It's no secret that women face

tougher beauty standards than men do. And if a female student feels insecure about her looks, that may leave her feeling less confident in other areas, including the classroom.

I'd venture to say that this dynamic doesn't go away in graduate school. And these pressures, modified for a more professional setting, continue further up the academic ladder. When packing for academic conferences, I've spent more time than I'd care to admit trying to find that perfect outfit that adheres to professional standards, but isn't too frumpy or too risqué.

That's not to say I favor the gender-neutral standard of ill-fitting grey pantsuits that's in vogue in my mostly male discipline; I'd just rather not to have to worry that I'm being judged on the length of my skirt, or whether my hair is up or down, instead of my intellect. In her book, *Wonder Woman: Sex, Power and the Quest for Perfection,* Barnard College's president, Debora Spar, calculated the amount of time she spends on self-care just to meet the excessive societal expectations for women. (Spoiler alert: It's considerable.) I'd wager money that her male peers, and mine, don't spend anywhere near that much time on their looks, nor do they feel much pressure to do so. Sadly, though, it's another hurdle women must jump through just to step into the game, even in academia.

Ridiculous beauty standards aside, female students may also face real obstacles to being heard in the classroom. In college seminar courses, where students are expected to debate and discuss what they're learning and participation often counts toward their grade, female students may come to feel unwelcome if male students are allowed to interrupt and dominate discussions, as studies show males are wont to do (sorry, guys). Anyone who's ever attended a Ph.D. or law seminar knows what I mean.

Unfortunately, even well-intentioned and fair-minded professors may inadvertently reinforce outdated gender norms by praising or calling on men more than women. Those cues, if they occur often enough, can shake female students' intellectual confidence and signal to them that their contributions aren't as valued as those of their louder (and ruder) male peers.

As women progress through college, grad school, and their careers, these daily inequities can easily add up. And that can undermine women's professional performance on everything from job applications to salary negotiations; it can even hurt their tenure prospects. For example, studies have shown that women generally apply only to those jobs for which they're totally qualified, whereas men tend to have no compunction about applying if they meet some, but not all, of a job's requirements. Women are less likely to tout their own research and more likely to be saddled with excessive service commitments than men are, too.

And is it any wonder women often have a harder time negotiating when they're not only fighting a "negotiation double standard," to borrow a phrase from *Slate*'s Katy Waldman, but also their own self-doubts? If we downplay our achievements and question our own abilities and worth, then how can we expect hirers, colleagues, publishers, and tenure-and-promotion committees to recognize them?

On the bright side, impostor syndrome may drive some people to work so hard that they succeed in spite of their chronic self-doubts, assuming they don't burn out first. For the rest of us, though, the first step to kicking our feelings of inadequacy may be recognizing where they come from and talking about them. As Robin Fleming, chair of the history department at Boston College, said of her institution's survey: There's a "kind of solidarity" in knowing that maybe you aren't "the only person who [feels] that way."

That's where support groups can help. Feminist groups can bolster women's self-esteem by providing safe spaces for discussion and affirmation that yes, they do belong in academia. In fact, a number of female academics from my own economics program meet occasionally to discuss our experiences. There are stories of being talked over in the classroom; of feeling uncomfortable speaking up in seminars while our male colleagues ask even the most inane questions without hesitation; of our advisors launching uncomfortable inquiries into our personal lives; of how our academic schedules affect our romantic lives.

And through this, we support and encourage one another as women to acknowledge our academic achievements and our place in our program. We call ourselves the Economisses.

Likeminded confederations—like the Art + Feminism Wikipedia Edit-a-Thon group, which draws attention to the important contributions of women in academia—can help women recognize and promote their own accomplishments on a personal and professional level.

But fighting impostor syndrome goes beyond that. If you're a teacher, for example, it's worth thinking about how you can change the culture around you.

Professors can make a concerted effort in the classroom to note the contributions of female students and encourage them to speak up. (I, for one, always appreciate it when a professor says, "We haven't heard from any women yet." This practice not only draws attention to the role of gender in the classroom, but also explicitly lets women know that they are, in fact, welcome.)

And as a professor, you can make a surprising difference just by opening up about your own academic insecurities. Talk frankly with your students about how you overcame doubts or are still working to overcome them. Knowing that professors feel like fakers from time to time, too, might help the rest of us feel a little less self-conscious—and a little more like we belong.

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