WIBS Imposter Syndrome Meeting Minutes

February 25, 2019

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* Starts with discussion of mentorship system we talked about last semester
  + There is some interest in the system
  + Jen says she is willing to organize it
    - Asks people to email her about what they’re interested in doing
    - Will send out email on the topic
  + Next month is networking discussion
* Dr. Devasmita Chakraverty is introduced
* Deva starts her presentation
  + Wants talk to be interactive, hand out pens and paper for people to write down their feelings
  + Wants to focus on research finding as well as anecdotes
  + Term of imposter syndrome, is it a problem to say syndrome?
    - Makes it sound like a narrow problem for a few people
    - Can be described as phenomenon
    - Syndrome is associated with stigma
    - We will stick to phenomenon
  + No one raises their hand on never hearing about imposter phenomenon or feeling it
  + Goes over list of statements that represent imposter phenomenon,
    - Statements focus on not deserving job, believing mistakes gave people their positions
    - All attending agree with recognizing the statements
    - All boils down to idea that “I am an imposter”
    - Inner voice tells us these things
  + Thrives on the fear of success
    - Deva tells story of physicians feeling like imposters
      * Successful people who are afraid of failing or think they are failing
  + Imposter phenomenon is an inability to separate fact from fiction, it come from internal experiences, not reality
    - Very persistent
    - Comment: We commonly believe the most successful people have everything already set up, we don’t expect them to have these experiences
  + How does it manifest?
    - Involved with not saying no as well, makes us want to please everyone
    - Will make us reduce risks and delay applications/submissions
    - Comments from attending: Worry about other people repeating your experiments and showing that you were wrong/did do the experiment right
  + Started going over study on phenomenon
    - 10 minute survey leading to 30-45 min interview if the participant said they recognize feeling the phenomenon
    - Sampled students and professionals in and outside academia
    - Got way more responses than expected
    - Stopped interviews due to changing job and resources
  + What does the research show?
    - Demography
      * 85% of participating were women
      * 85% white
      * Was surprised to find 15% of the study were men experiencing it, since articles typically identify the phenomenon with women and not men
      * Good representation from many US states
      * ~35% were students
  + What does it mean to be an imposter?
    - Lack of belonging
    - Based on the idea that others were being nice to you or because they were raised to believe they did not belong in the field they are in (tied to gender roles as well)
    - People talk about lack of belonging in science, department, classrooms, or a specific paper
      * It can exist on many different levels and appear in many shapes and forms
    - Fear of being found out
      * Belief that they have fooled people to get where they are
  + Will it persist over time?
    - Provided examples of various people from different stages in their academic careers producing quotes
    - Phenomenon is very resistant to be changed by new data
      * No matter how many accomplishments you have, you will still think you are an imposter
  + Why do people experience this?
    - Professional training is complex and time intensive
    - We get a lot of cues from the environment, we see a lot of failure and build up an aversion to it
    - Thoughts can come from childhood
  + Who feels like an imposter?
    - Issue tend to be strongest in under-represented minorities and women
    - Also people who take a break from academia (such as women who leave for maternity)
    - People who do interdisciplinary research
    - Those who experience frequent transitions
    - People who feel like they are the “only one” of anything within a department
    - Also closely linked to sexual harassment
      * Especially when advisors commit the harassment
      * Give people the feeling they can’t accomplish things on their own
      * Comments: can’t believe that someone would say the quote presented (quote of someone saying another person should marry them to get a job)
      * “We’re all very horrified”
      * People were very honest when completing the interview with Deva
  + How early does it start?
    - Gets the worst first year of PhD according to most
      * Transitioning from “big fish in a pond to small fish in a see”
      * Know what to do to get a good GPA, but don’t know how to do well in a PhD
      * Many felt like an imposter but didn’t know it had a name
  + Role of advisors
    - Unsporting advisors
    - PhD students were blamed for low productivity
    - Can have strong negative feelings toward female students, especially those who have children
      * Found to be the case with both male and female advisors
  + Role of Gender
    - Both men and women feel imposter phenomenon
    - Cannot conclude that they feel it in the same way
      * Many men stopped feeling like an imposter very quickly, women did not feel like that
      * Comment from audience: Point stating that imposter phenomenon could be a personal problem one has their whole life, and that men are told to not report/feel it while it is expected for women
    - For many men the feeling is talked about it with objectivity
      * Related to not knowing much about the field
      * Men experienced the imposter phenomenon on aspects that can be improved in many cases
    - For women had more to do with how people view them
      * Related to treatment by coworkers or advisors
  + Internal voices
    - Based on external cues
      * Comment from others will degrade confidence and will fuel the inner voice
  + What can be done to overcome it
    - Comment: We should talk about it so we know we’re not the only ones experiencing it
    - Asks everyone to take surveys and write down how strong the feelings are
  + Tools and resources
    - Create safe spaces for conversation about he issue, building a community about it will help people talk openly about it
      * Problem with “Fake it till you make it” because by saying you’re faking it, you reject it.
    - Binary or spectrum: people with low levels of the feeling can feel it is a way to control their impulses, but can also be self-handicapping
    - Asking for feedback is a good idea
    - Done is better than perfect, finish things, they don’t need to be perfect
* Following Conversation
  + Question: Some people who responded were 50, 60, 70 years old, did they feel it less over time?
    - Some people experienced it getting better
    - Some people saw that with age, they experienced new roles and responsibilities that made it worse during each transition
  + Questions: What are the mental health effects of this?
    - Correlation between imposter phenomenon and mental health issues, personality disorders, anxiety, and depression
    - Deva did not specifically study this though
    - Qualitative study is risky, you need to draw a line between talking to someone and being their therapist
  + Comment: If we had to do a part 2 to the study, what would we do?
  + Questions: Correlation for specific departments?
    - Do not know, no information was taking regarding departments
    - If Deva could do a part 2, she would want to follow people for multiple years through their careers
  + Questions: Do people rate themselves on how strong it feels?
    - Yes, there are two scales used that all participants of the study had to feel out
    - Had to keep the survey very short, didn’t want to lose people
    - Study was set up as more of a pilot study due to concern that Deva would not get many responses
  + End of Talk with Deva
* Follow up Chat
  + Many people left after Deva’s presentation
  + Question: How much mental health stuff did you expect, did you expect anything else?
    - It matched expectations, the examples were very helpful, and comforting
    - Having a name for it really helps
  + Discussion of different types of the feeling
    - Some people don’t feel imposter syndrome stops them from doing things
    - Imposter syndrome seems to come from a fear of not deserving success, more than a fear of failure
  + Are people dismissive of it?
    - Do we use this to justify something that we are not doing?
    - Do we justify our laziness?
    - Is it imposter syndrome or are we not hard enough workers?
  + Intangible goal part of it
    - When goals are ambiguous, it shatters the world view and makes ranking yourself hard
    - In grad school we have so many things we could do, we can’t do them all, but feel like we should
  + What could we do as a department?
    - PhD orientation discussing the issue
    - It should be in all levels, including undergrads
    - Faculty could talk to grad students? Outline what it is?
      * Maybe be part of a more full mental health thing
      * In faculty orientation there is a talk about work life balance
        + Could do something like that during grad student orientation
        + Include work-life balance because you should work as much as you can
  + Is there an assumption that you are already a hard working student?
    - You must already be working productively to get the message, and we are sending the message that you should live too
  + Interesting that she got some many responses, when she didn’t expect many
    - Mirrors personal experience where everyone believes its just them
    - Every woman in science they talk to has experienced these things (especially the external cues)
    - Notes to speak up if we see cues, because the person facing them will probably absorb it and not recognize it