


# Imposter Syndrome Contains a Source of Strength

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## COMMENTARY

The memory has grown hazy and I suspect embellishments, but nevertheless I recall finding myself during the George W. Bush presidency in a casual conversation in Washington with three talented and accomplished thirty-something women. Somehow, the conversation turned to “imposter syndrome,” a malady of which I had not heard but from which all three of my female acquaintances said they suffered. The recurring inquiries I have made over the years among credentialed and professionally ambitious Washington women suggest that the malady still exacts its costs. I continue to believe, as I did when I first learned of it in that long-ago conversation, that imposter syndrome also contains a source of strength.

The women saw it differently. One covered national affairs at a prominent media outlet. Another served as a senior fellow in foreign affairs at a leading D.C. think tank. A third occupied an enviable position in the national security establishment. All believed that imposter syndrome only held them back.

Imposter syndrome, they explained, caused women to feel that they really didn’t belong in their prestige positions. Anxious that they were deceiving their colleagues by masquerading as competent individuals, women avoided the best seats at the conference table. They kept their opinions to themselves at meetings rather than forthrightly lay out their ideas. They complied dutifully with their bosses’ useless or counterproductive directives. They hesitated to ask for raises. And, having mustered the courage to ask, they requested too small a boost to their wages.

Exacerbating the consequences of imposter syndrome, the women told me, were the men with whom they competed in the workplace. The guys exhibited a surfeit of self-confidence. They seemed to never doubt their own worth, to settle themselves in the best seats in the room, to freely offer their opinions on all occasions, to speak boldly to their bosses, and to regularly land outsized salary increases.

I had seen something of that dynamic, I responded, and expressed my sympathy for their predicament. I added cautiously that in this egalitarian age, one could also find here and there among D.C.’s political and intellectual elites diffident men and overbearing women.

Then, at the risk of revealing my cluelessness and bringing the conversation to a swift and awkward end, I said to the women that perhaps imposter syndrome was not always a debilitating creation of women's imagination. Maybe women were on to something: They were in a sense imposters.

Confronted by astonished looks but before the women could express indignation, I hastened to add that the bigger problem in Washington was that the men in their offices were insufficiently endowed with imposter syndrome. The unexpected twist gave the women pause and bought me time to explain.

You may be self-effacing to a fault, but you earned your positions of status and influence, I reminded them, and you are every bit as qualified as your arrogant male colleagues. In fact, it's likely that you discern something important that the men miss, I continued. Behind your suspicion that you are imposters, I'm guessing, is an awareness, largely unspoken, that you could perform your tasks more responsibly by increasing your knowledge and honing your skills.

Recognizing the presumption of holding forth to others about the meaning of their experience and sensing that I had gone about as far as the occasion permitted, I stopped there. But when I reconstruct that old conversation, as I sometimes do these days in seminar discussions, I elaborate on the virtue embedded in imposter syndrome.

Wouldn't a national correspondent for a major U.S. newspaper benefit from greater knowledge of American history and enhanced study of economics, religion, and war – topics on which journalists, male as well as female, are often weak? Wouldn't a senior fellow in foreign affairs at a distinguished D.C. think tank profit from heightened facility with the languages spoken in the region in which she specializes and from more comprehensive exploration of the distant cultures, societies, and political orders concerning which she presumes to offer guidance – areas in which American policy analysts, regardless of gender, have much room for improvement? Wouldn't a national security official boost her ability to discharge her duties through extensive reading in the history of American foreign policy and military history – neither of which topics are commonly studied in depth these days by the defense establishment or the U.S. diplomatic corps?

To the extent that imposter syndrome causes women to underestimate their capabilities, to feel inadequate, to undercut their contributions, and to desist from the pursuit of what they deserve, it is a disadvantageous disposition to remedy. The appreciation of one's limitations, however, is a valuable quality to foster because it provides a salutary check on the hubris precipitated by professional advancement – and not only in Washington.

A properly harnessed appreciation of one's limitations nourishes the Socratic wisdom that consists in knowledge of what one does not know. Well-disciplined, it tames the snobbery of elite scorn and the reverse snobbery of scorn for elites – as Jane Austen's Mr. Darcy

overcame the prejudices stemming from his aristocratic pride and as her Lizzy Bennet triumphed over the prejudices arising from her pride in puncturing aristocratic pretense. And confined to appropriate proportions, an appreciation of one's limitations reinforces John Stuart Mill's great lesson that because we are fallible, we have a keen interest in learning to listen to other people's opinions, particularly their opinions about where our opinions go astray.

So understood, plenty of men in positions of power and preeminence in D.C. would benefit from a healthy dose of imposter syndrome.

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