

Imposter Agony Aunts: Ambivalent Feminist Advice

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Introduction

Imposter syndrome is something of a buzzword in blogs and online commentaries on higher education (HE) and is receiving increasing research attention. Research findings regularly orientate towards advice for coping with feeling like an imposter in the university (Hutchins & Rainbolt 2017). For instance research identifies reflexive diary keeping (Wilkinson 2020) and coaching and mentoring (Hutchins et al. 2018) as strategies for combating academics' imposterism. Likewise, everyday informal talk of academic imposter syndrome, including on social media, repeats advice on how to overcome imposterism (Taylor & Breeze 2020). A common recommendation is that academics 'open up' (Bahn 2014) and share experiences of insecurity, inadequacy, fraudulence, and failure: 'The first rule of impostor syndrome is you talk about impostor syndrome' (Vaughn 2019 np). Having participated in university training courses, mentoring programmes, and having been on the receiving end of such advice, in this chapter we re-think the politics of advice and of *talking about it*. What structures and surpasses *opening up* in reflexive accounts of imposterism? What are the preconditions and limits of advice-giving and receiving? In this chapter we think through the ambivalences of these questions, exploring how feminist academics might respond to and rework a familiar advice format by inhabiting the figure of the *agony aunt*. Throughout we aim to explore the possibilities and constraints of feminist advice as well as drawing attention to underlying assumptions perpetuated in *advising*, when *talking about it* is heralded as a solution to the problem of imposter 'syndrome'.

The appropriateness, usefulness, and political effects of 'opening up' about imposter syndrome have already been queried. The circulation of academic imposter confessions can: be congruent with neoliberal imperatives towards reflexively storying the self (Addison & Mountford 2015, Adkins 2002, Skeggs 2002), carry different risks and rewards depending on hierarchical academic positioning, and can reduce systemic educational inequalities to individual-level solutions such as working on the self to build confidence (Breeze 2018). The prevailing focus on individualised strategies for overcoming imposter syndrome tends to emphasise a seemingly common felt sense of (not) belonging in ways that resonate with, while glossing over, enduring educational inclusions and exclusions, *and* existing bodies of knowledge about inequality regimes in HE (Taylor & Breeze 2020).

Working in this context, this chapter grows from and contributes to the development of, a multi-pronged argument about the limits and effects of sharing imposter experiences in HE, which can be 1) individualising (imposter syndrome as a personal problem of confidence, anxiety or self-esteem), 2) universalising (imposter syndrome as a ubiquitous problem that simply *everyone* experiences from time to time) and therefore 3) depoliticising (imposter syndrome as detached from educational inequality regimes, epistemic hierarchies and injustices, and the class-race-gender contours of who is recognised as a credible academic (Gutiérrez Y Muhs et al. 2012) and 4) a way to *claim* an outsider position in the academy *despite* evidenced success and belonging. We take up this argument in order to further explore what can happen when imposter experiences are narrated and shared, particularly in advice-seeking formats, and to nuance and temper common-sense recommendations to ‘open up’ and seek advice from a mentor or coach about imposter feelings.

This chapter traces its origins and imaginings across multiple research projects, publications, and events. While the three authors have collaborated variously over the years (including in formalised mentoring) we began working together on imposter syndrome in 2018, after Breeze and Taylor organised a British Sociological Association Early Career Forum funded symposium on *Imposter Syndrome as Public Feeling in Higher Education* (Glasgow, UK) at which Addison gave a keynote address. Led by Addison, the authors later organised *Imposter Syndrome as a Public Feeling in Education* an Economic and Social Research Council funded public event for the ‘Festival of Social Sciences’ in November 2019, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK. This event brought together academics, school-aged students, and community activist practitioners from across the UK interested in imposterism and intersecting inequalities in education. Our pitch for the event was as follows:

This event focuses on how imposter syndrome becomes translated, negotiated and refused. In contemporary educational times, negotiating such a ‘syndrome’ might mean ‘working on the self’ in a climate of competitiveness and endless metrics. Inhabiting the ‘right kind’ of presence in an education setting is not straightforward and can engender a sensation of imposterism. We ask why this matters and how these senses can be negotiated and resisted, and located within a broader educational economy beyond the individual ‘imposter’.

In Newcastle, Breeze and Taylor presented a paper in which we read *imposter agony aunt letters* playing with a problem-page format and responding to advice-seeking from fictionalised, composite academic figures across the career course. This presentation drew upon

and developed previous iterations of the imposter agony aunts project: Breeze's workshops with PhD students in Dundee (funded by the Scottish Graduate School for Social Sciences) and Edinburgh in April and May of 2019. The workshops asked participants to take on the role of agony aunt and compose sociological responses to fictionalised, composite academics seeking advice on imposter syndrome. In picking up and developing this approach further in this chapter we are likewise drawing on our other multiple engagements with *advising* such as the 'Dear Doctor' format Taylor explored with colleagues (Jones et al. 2019), postcard writing as method and dissemination (Taylor, Costa & Singh 2020) and our research on cross-career collaborations and mentorship (Breeze & Taylor 2018). We are also continuing to explore the idea of playing social games, including with gender, class and emotion in academic identities, experiences, and practices (Addison 2016).

The development of imposter agony aunts and letter-writing methodologies, and use of fictionalised composite academic characters, is further inspired and contextualised by long standing feminist debates on politicising the personal. This chapter therefore contributes to contemporary debates in feminist methods, about the epistemological status of experiential knowledge and reflexive, autobiographical methods (Adkins 2002, Skeggs 2002 Gannon & Gonnick 2019). Opening up and 'talking about it' (Periera 2016: 107) has a long history in feminist strategies for inhabiting and transforming the non-feminist university. Speaking candidly about 'secrets and silences' (Flood & Gill 2010) that can characterise the pains, pangs and sharp edges of doing feminist academic work 'can have profoundly transformative effects' (Periera 2016: 107, Taylor & Lahad 2018). Sharing academic failures and inadequacies can usefully de-mystify academic success (Bagilhole & White 2013). Likewise, making putatively private 'bad feelings' and 'negative affects' (Cvetkovich 2007) public and political offers a way to work with imposter syndrome as socially structured phenomena. Feminist methods remain ambivalently committed to ways of knowing grounded in personal experience, even as sharing these can become congruent with managerial practices of surveillance and audit in the university (Gannon et al. 2015) and with the ideal reflexive self in late modernity (Adkins, 2002). This chapter grows from the ambivalence (and implied embarrassment) of 'opening up' about imposter syndrome, which can work both as a feminist intervention *and* as depoliticised, individualised confession of inadequacy and erasure of systemic inclusions and exclusions.

In this chapter as we return to writing and responding to *imposter agony aunt* 'problem page' letters, the three of us play with taking on the roles of advice-seeker *and* advice-giver, writing from and stretching beyond our own experiences, both fictionalising these and imagining

ourselves into different locations. We combine auto-ethnographic fictions (Breeze & Taylor 2020, Inckle 2010, Markle 2012, Watson 2016) with letter writing and replying as research method, drawing on contemporary examples of using writing letters and postcards to specific and generalised academic figures and institutions to explore inequalities and hierarchies in HE (Jones et al. 2019; Taylor, Costa and Singh 2020). In practice the three of us each composed at least one letter seeking advice about feeling like an imposter, and took turns to respond to each other's letters, taking on the role of ambivalent feminist agony aunt, in a process of iterative and collaborative exchange of writing.

The letter from the 'Over-promoted Professor' was used in Breeze's workshops with PhD students, and responded to by Taylor as a 'Feminist Advisor' at the Newcastle event described above. The 'Collegial Feminist' letter and response from an 'Unsure Imposter Expert' was also presented by Breeze and Taylor at Newcastle. The 'Anti-hero' and the 'Precarity Hangover' letters and responses were written collaboratively by the authors for this chapter. In writing both advice-seeking and advice-giving letters, we each drew variously upon our cumulative experiences studying and working in universities, as well as reaching beyond individual experience to fictionalise and imagine composite academic characters. The imposter agony aunt letters we present here are part collaborative autobiography, part creative autoethnographic writing, part auto-theory (Fournier 2021, Nelson 2015) part tongue-in-cheek intervention into the gendered economies of advice giving and seeking in academic work.

Advice seeking, giving, and receiving is a recognisable genre in formal academic research and informal popular discussions about imposter syndrome. For instance Cohen & McConnell's (2019) research emphasises the importance of 'high quality mentorship' for decreasing the likelihood of postgraduate students experiencing imposter syndrome. *Advising* – whether formalised in officially recognised working relationships as with PhD supervision, or in more informal practices of collaboration and collegiality – can be a central aspect of feminist cross-career collaborations and mentorship (Jones et al. 2019, Breeze & Taylor 2018). However, feminists have long analysed and protested the gendered division – and recognition – of this kind of caring, pastoral labour (Cardozo 2017, Lynch 2010). Advice giving as thoroughly gendered work is notable here, and we question whose advisory work is recognised as work, and whose is naturalised as expected-devalued feminised labour (Hochschild 2003, Gregg 2008, Bloch 2002).

The position of ‘agony aunt’ in particular has a status as depoliticised feminised carer, with magazine ‘problem pages’ associated with young women and teenagers, part of a misrecognised aspect of girls’ youth culture (McRobbie 1990). Agony aunt figures in teen magazines are explicitly designated in terms of feminised familial relationality, and can be positioned as ‘trusted friends’ to readers who write in seeking advice on relationships and sexual health (Williams 2004), glossing the *work* and expertise of advice-giving. The agony aunt figure is adjacent to and reconfigured in burgeoning self-help industries and literatures. The specificities of academic advice unfold in a broader self-help context where techniques such as ‘power posing’ have gained mainstream prominence, and women in particular are encouraged to endlessly identify and address supposed deficiencies in themselves, including at the level of body language and ‘chemistry’ (Cuddy 2015). Riley et al. (2019: 3) point out how self-help overall is ‘problematically gendered, since women are often positioned as particularly in need of improvement’.

Contemporarily, the provision of advice for academics is a burgeoning cottage industry providing podcasts, websites and one-to-one career coaching giving advice on accessing and negotiating an academic career (for instance *The Professor is In* - Karen Kelsky, and *The Learning Curve Collective* - Vik Turbine). Academic self-help books continue to be published, with titles such as *Survive and Thrive in Academia: The New Academic's Pocket Mentor* (Woodthorpe 2018) and *Being Well in Academia: Ways to Feel Stronger, Safer and More Connected* (Boynton 2021). Publishers have launched series around *Insider Guides to Success in Academia* (Routledge - Pat Thompson and Helen Kara). More informally, academics’ use of social media can include advice-seeking, and ‘crowd-sourced career counselling’ (Gregory & Singh 2018: 179).

We do not seek to denigrate or dismiss the many forms of academic advice seeking and giving; there is clearly a demand for advice about being and becoming academic, and de-mystifying elitist, archaic institutions is useful, necessary work. Here we set out to explore what sharing problems and giving advice about imposter syndrome *does*, given the context outlined above. We hope that by occupying the roles of problem-page-letter-writer and imposter agony aunt that this chapter offers a ‘chance to be frivolous’ and irreverent rather than following ‘the tried and true paths of knowledge production’ (Halberstam 2011: 6). We hope to draw attention to some of the effects/affects of naming and claiming an imposter experience from different social and institutional locations – rather than presenting these as authentic or unmediated tellings – and hold the position of advice giver and advice receiver in ambivalent tension. We’re

interested in the limits as well as the possibilities of talking about, and ‘coping’ with imposter syndrome.

As you read on you might consider what advice *you* would give to a colleague or peer who feels as if they don’t belong when all evidence points to their ‘fit’ in academia. Who do you offer advice to and who do you look towards as an agony aunt – and might she resent or refuse the question? What does good, ethical advice look like across differences in academic status, seniority, power and authority – are early career colleagues always recipients and established career colleagues always providers? Who is expected to advise, to soothe, to facilitate and boost a sense of worthiness and belonging? In playing with the problem page format we stretch to move beyond depoliticised individualised-universalised framings of imposter syndrome, and reflect on the limitations of this approach.

The Collegial Feminist

Dear Imposter Agony Aunts,

I have heard that you are world leading authorities on ‘imposter syndrome’ – I’d appreciate your thoughts.

I am a woman professor, who has apparently ‘made it’, I’ve got into the world of academia, something I never thought I’d do, mostly because I’d never even walked through a University and neither had anyone in my family (I realise this – me – is now called ‘first generation’). I met with my personal tutor. I heard him talking with another student about her gap year while I waited for him to sign off my grant form. He asked me if I’d come in via the ‘widening participation route’ and ‘Are you from *Glasgow*?’. Now I know that the ‘widening participation route’ offers reduced grades if they pass a summer school. I didn’t know this at the time but knew very much what the implication was: I might be an imposter. The question on his lips was ‘how did *you* get here?!’. I cited my all ‘A’ grade Highers results – I’m not sure he understood what Scottish Highers were – he mumbled something about A-level equivalency. I stared him out, raging, clutching my signed grant form.

Anyway, advisor, I reminisce – oh, those undergraduate years! Working nearly full-time hours while doing a full-time degree was not in the student handbook... But I’m a Professor now. People often ask for my timeline to professor and the implication is, I understand, that there is a right and wrong time, place, and way to ‘be’ a professor and I am not that person!

Here is my problem: I want to be supportive to my early career counterparts. While I'm sympathetic to changing working conditions, and the reality that very few people secure a permanent position, I instinctively react against a framing of these 'early career' positions as inherently 'precarious'— they are often NOT. They are often occupied by the very people imagining uncomplicated academic belonging, and feeling entitled to a career with an automatic upward, rather than accidental, trajectory. I wake up most mornings to #academictwitter call outs to #mentoraneCR #buyaECRadrink I secretly seethe knowing that such labour falls on the usual suspects...

I *am* present and collegial - and nonetheless get asked if I 'been away' when working from home two days running, whose international visits are dismissed as 'holidays', whose productivity gets framed as excessive, and who has colleagues knocking on my door for advice. I am the feminist professor who listens to unasked for and inaccurate explanations of gender from male colleagues.

My question is can there be connections across academic hierarchies and 'career courses' so that we can locate the 'imposter' as e.g. the institution itself and its host of imposing positions that it generates, including the non-feminist gender 'expert', the doubtful personal tutor who finds a Glaswegian interestingly inaccessible, and the all public and tweeting precarious future-academics, who have seemingly never experienced educational failure...

Best,

Collegial Feminist

Dear Collegial Feminist,

It is very flattering to be addressed as a 'world leading authority' and before responding I'd like to question that a bit. As a feminist professor I'm sure you're familiar with how academic authority is constructed according to intersecting forms of discrimination. You describe a colleague 'explaining' gender to you, despite your obvious expertise in this area! This sounds like a rage-inducing experience, and I wonder how you responded being patronised, which I am imagining as a repetitive occurrence not a one-off, this problem is bigger than just one mansplaining colleague...

So yes, I'll give the best advice I can, but I have to be clear – lots of people know about 'imposter syndrome'. We need to be careful not to gloss over enduring structural inequalities (who has access to an academic career, who is (mis)recognised as an expert, and who is continually expected to be supporting colleagues without recognition). We must refuse to participate in the pretence that institutional sexism is a problem of confidence or self-esteem! You know this, I suspect via both research evidence and the everyday experience of being a feminist professor – I don't have advice for *you* on this point because it is your patronising colleague who needs to do the work.

What needs to change is the social processes by which some forms of knowledge, embodiments of expertise, and forms of academic work are devalued and continually repositioned as inadequate and as other.

Your commitment to supporting early career colleagues is often positioned as an core feminist commitment. It sounds as if you do a lot of this kind of work – mentoring and supporting, buffering and making space for feminist work– and that your colleagues regularly seek out your advice. I also believe that while the university absolutely depends upon this labour to continue to function, this work isn't recognised or rewarded in pay or promotions structure, rather it is taken for granted – naturalised as something that women, and feminist professors will *just do* – because we love our jobs, or because we are 'lucky' to be here in the first place.

My understanding is that the university depends on exploiting *both* the unrecognised work of supporting early career colleagues *and* the underpaid research and teaching work done on hourly paid contracts in the 'early' career. We know that women and black and minority ethnic colleagues are disproportionately likely to be employed on these kinds of contracts *and* that colleagues from these same demographics are most likely to have their collegiality naturalised, expected, and extracted. We know that feminist academic work is at risk of being recaptured by the system feminists are labouring to transform. I think we know that 'early career' and the 'established career' are not homogenous categories, and academics at all career stages encounter the entrenched inequalities of the university, albeit from different locations– perhaps this offers grounds for the connection that you seek?

Can we build solidarities across career stages, that don't gloss over enduring structural inequalities? That don't rely on more unrecognised and devalued feminized labour? Such connections might be fragile and temporary, stretched thinly through recurrent crises (like

strikes over pay inequalities and pensions), or they might be enduring – lifelong friendships, career-long collaborations.

Without a bullet-pointed list of self-help actions to ‘overcome’ these imposter-problems, I think we are left trying to work with the variable resources available to, and the compromises of working within the discriminatory academic career course with all the privilege and precarity it engenders.

Yours,

An Unsure Imposter Expert

The Anti-hero

Dear Imposter Agony Aunts,

Today I logged into my emails and felt a flash of rage. I had to talk to you – in a safe space. I’m conscious of how what I say at work could come back and bite me – I *know* that playing the game is important but I regularly get this wrong. Anyway, some context, things are unbelievable here at the moment, the whole world has been impacted by an unprecedented pandemic leading to an unfathomable loss of life. I can’t get my head around it. And yet time lurches ahead.

I’m at a post-92 university, but more of that later. Workloads have increased massively, never mind stress levels. But that’s okay apparently because it’s supposedly affecting everyone equally (don’t get me started) so we all have to just pull together and embody the *Blitz* – sorry, I mean, *collegiate* spirit. What do you think of this? I find it very frustrating – some are hailed upon to do much, much more – whilst others, it seems, see an opportunity to play at Houdini and work on accruing prized assets – papers, papers, papers and research monies. Between you and me, I’m thinking *why* am I not able to do all of this? I can’t keep up. The news headline I saw recently read ‘*academics have a summer off, students ask for fees back*’. A summer off? I could’ve cried.

This morning in my email I read an invitation to a training session offered by the university’s newly formed ‘Feminist and Women’s Organisation’. Get this, it read: ‘*What is your Superpower?*’ And so it goes, encouraging me to attend to learn about ‘owning’ my own ‘personal brilliance’ because I’ve apparently lost sight of my ‘superpowers’. Argh rage! I

promise I'm not making this up! Should I go along, I will learn how to 'show up' in the workplace and create my own personal unique, brand (read: just so long as it *fits* with the USP of the university). I am told to bring along my cape (not a joke).

Breathe.

I've asked myself 'why do I find this so triggering?' It's *just* a training course. Do you think I'm overthinking things? All my life, in education, I've had to work on myself to fit in. Maybe I do have a chip on my shoulder. When I was 6 years old I was put in a remedial class for reading. Now, let me tell you I was a kid who loved reading. We couldn't afford the uniform, I wore my cousin's hand-me-down shoes. I discovered then that class makes a difference to how you are seen; I was perceived as not very clever because of where I was from. I cut my teeth on imposterism by wanting to be in the blue reading group and learning that I didn't fit the mould. Fast forward to my entrance interview with the Principal of a 200 year-old college at [insert brand] university. With bright red hair and my pinstriped shirt from *Select* I thought I looked smart as hell – I'd gotten it so wrong. I realised this walking down the cobbled streets seeing what students 'here' looked and sounded like. The Principal asked 'why have *you* picked this university, when your other choices are so...?' *Inferior* is what he was getting at as he trailed off. Nobody told me how to play the game, how to fit in: cue fish out of water.

Fast-forward again to holding a research post at a Russell Group University. My sense of not fitting in here was really acute. I tried to talk about differences and diversity with peers at lunch and over coffee; I was quietly taken aside by a Professor and told in no uncertain terms to tone it down as I was apparently being a 'class warrior' and it was making others feel very uncomfortable. I'm sad about the impact this had on me, you know. I tried to fit in but it was impossible and painful, the more I tried to assimilate the more inadequate and anxious I became. I was surrounded by alpha women who took huge pride in being perceived as 'superwomen', who knew they belonged. I just wanted to pay my bills and feed my kids. I felt I had no choice but to work on myself and try to be like them, what is it they say, 'lean in'? All this to hopefully get my temporary contract renewed. But you know how neoliberal universities work – would you say resistance is futile? Assimilate, integrate, conform.

One night, as I was listening to my 7 year-old daughter read 'The Emperor's New Clothes', it dawned on me: I don't have to be a *Super Woman*. Just because everyone around me thinks this is how to *be* in academia, doesn't mean I have to pick up this proverbial cloak. I decided

then I didn't want to play that game anymore. So, I left that institution despite everyone thinking I was foolish – *but it's so prestigious here (isn't it?)*.

Where am I going with this...? *What is your Superpower? Show up in the workplace! Find your personal, unique brand! Put on your cape! 'Be more like superwoman'* [Read: white, middle class, cis-female, able-bodied, privileged, care-'free' and never in need of sleep]. No thanks.

I started writing this letter feeling rage. When I saw that email (from a feminist network at that!) I just thought 'not again'. I thought this institution was different. Am I being naïve thinking things could be different?

Deep down I'm panicking – I know times are extraordinary for so many reasons. But to try and cope with them through super-hero levels of power and performance, when I know it is only some people asked to work on themselves and work harder, it's so disheartening. I can't keep up. Becoming something 'other' to belong is painful. Do you know what I mean? Maybe I just don't fit. I don't want to be Superwoman. But Imposter Agony Aunts - where does that leave me?

Many thanks.

Anon.

Dear Anon,

Thank you for writing, I'll respond as best I can. You ask what I think of universities' responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, and I'm writing back in September 2020, when, like you say, time is lurching ahead and claims of 'business as usual' (don't forget to capitalise on new commercialisation opportunities!) are accompanied by avowed commitments to staff and student *safety and wellbeing*. Student rent strikes are spreading. University-branded face coverings have been produced. Mindfulness sessions have been promoted. There is something called a 'Wellbeing Hub'. You're not the only one who can't get your head around it, not the only one who wants to cry. I wonder what possibilities there might be in talking with colleagues about these frightening and enraging circumstances? Is it possible to collectivise a response?

I think in a sense, aspects of the pandemic *are* very much 'business as usual' as familiar power dynamics and hierarchies are retrenched in the university in who is over-burdened with more

workload and unacknowledged caring labours, and who is free to add to ever-lengthening CVs. You knowingly laugh at the fiction that the pandemic affects everyone equally, and feminists know that as with other on-going crises, the usual suspects will find a way to profit. So I think you *already know why* you can't 'do it all', do endlessly more, or 'keep up', you already know how the university works, how workloads (for some more than others) are impossible and overwhelming by design, it isn't an innocent mistake that your employer wants you to do more with less. You already have a sharp feminist analysis of gender and class and power and game-playing in higher education, but where does this knowledge leave you? Where does it leave us? What might we do with it?

I'm aware I'm answering with more questions, please bear with me in this rock-and-a-hard-place problem of how to negotiate, and perhaps try to transform, an institution that positions you and others as classed outsiders, trespassers, intruders. I think one of the tricks that academic training plays is convincing us that robust evidence and persuasive arguments are enough to transform institutions. There is an abundance of evidence about inequalities in higher education, and of compelling arguments about how class stratification and normative gender regimes are (re)produced in everyday university interactions. Bookshelves bulge with empirical data, and journals are stuffed with theories, for all the problems you describe. Feminist academics have known for *decades* what it is like to bump up against the hard edges of the university from various outsider-insider positions. I think we've also known for a long time – although it is harder to admit– that it is *power* that makes a difference, power that maintains stasis and enduring re-articulations of distinction, entitlement, and privilege. What might seizing power in the university (beyond shallow celebrations of 'women in leadership') look like?

I think this is one reason that the superhero training session is so absurd, depressing and enraging. I wonder what you see as the forces behind the university running this session? What are the intentions of the Feminist and Women's Organisation? Can bullshit-detection be a superpower? Can being a feminist killjoy be a personal brand in the workplace? Can refusing to play the game – as you've already begun to do – be a strategy? It sounds infantilising, all the while tasking you up with doing more, being more resilient, working harder. I notice how seductive these kinds of appeals to personal mastery and work on the self can be – maybe we *can* do it all? Maybe if I got up an hour earlier...? Feminists' hard work, feminised labour, and the work involved in 'fitting in' already goes unrecognised and unrewarded by the university,

ignored even by those claiming feminism in the running of dubious training sessions that locate deficiency in the individual rather than identifying the failures of the institution

This enraging training session is an example of feminist ideas captured by the university and sold back to us in terms of self-improvement and exponential productivity. In the face of unsubtle neoliberal imperatives to just work harder, a politics of refusal becomes more appealing. We hear this in advice to ‘just say no’, to requests for work that doesn’t align with our core goals, values, and strategy, ‘personal brand’ even... Working less is likely necessary, but is complicated when working less means fewer feminist presences, in research groups, on the curriculum, in the team meeting... and the work refused doesn’t go away, but is passed on to someone less able to ‘just say no’. Not everyone can *just say no*, and noes are heard differently: one person’s admirable boundaries and respected priorities are another’s lack of collegiality, lack of ambition...

There aren’t any easy answers here. The power structures of the university don’t exist as entirely separate from our own identities, they have shaped us, their tentacles are in our brains. I’m sorry the best advice I have turns back to you: knowing what we cumulatively know about power in the university, what can we do? I wonder about the possibilities engendered by not fitting in, what’s so good about being recognisable as a normative academic subject anyway? (Apart from an easier path to employment, pay-rises and promotion...). Perhaps there are more generative, hopeful possibilities beyond that, which lie in some refusals of recognition, with their own risks and rewards, but still...

Yours, apologetically,

Agony Aunt Considering A Career Change

The Precarity Hangover

Dear Imposter Agony Aunts,

I know you must be terribly busy, so I’ll try and keep it brief: my question is about *speaking up* as a feminist academic in a decidedly un-feminist university.

I recently made the transition from temporary and part time contracts to the holy grail of academic employment: an open-ended contract. I knew that with this shift, I wanted to stretch

my wings and stomp my feet a bit more. My feminist politics (naïvely?) spur a desire to *make a difference*.

In previous roles I was conscious that contract renewals were dependent on maintaining good relationships with my ‘superiors’: being willing to go beyond the job description and chronically over-work yes, but more than that – being amenable, likable, happy to help: a *good girl*. I bit my tongue when I saw and heard things that set feminist alarm bells ringing.

After getting a PhD (success! arrival! promise of material security!) I spent a year sleeping on a mattress in the windowless box room of a friend’s flat while I strung together ‘hourly paid’ teaching and research contracts and applied frantically for every job I could. I don’t mention this because I’m looking for sympathy, I don’t think this kind of experience marks me as particularly unique, and I’m not telling a tale of resiliently bootstrapping myself up to academic success, but a creeping fear of joblessness lurks in the back of my mind. I’m scared that if I speak up too much that I will render myself unemployable.

I *know* this fear isn’t exactly true: I have an open-ended contract, a salary, an office door with my name on it, a mentor, research networks! I think my job *is* secure, but my understanding of this security – and what I might do with it, is lagging behind, a precarity hang-over.

Do you have any advice for how to leverage the job security I now benefit from towards feminist ends? For getting over the insidious fear of speaking up? How to make feminist critique of the power dynamics of the university *more than* ‘just’ critiques? I know I’m not the first person to consider these questions, and feminists have been analysing and negotiating feminist incorporations and complicities in universities for decades, but these problems repeat themselves and I’m very interested in your perspective!

Eagerly awaiting your response,

Insecure Secure Academic

Dear Insecure Secure Academic,

Thanks for being so conscientious about acknowledging my own busyness. I wonder if this is part of the cycle of finding it difficult to speak up. I ponder if, through this emotional labour that you’re doing before you even outline your issue, you’re already putting my needs first. That’s appreciated of course - but perhaps also indicates to others that what you want to discuss

is not worthy of their 'full' attention. You're giving me a ready-made excuse, 'I'm sorry I'm too busy to answer you'. I wonder if this also feeds into a wider problem of not being 'important' enough to legitimately have attention. Can you think of any colleagues who would omit your first sentence, take up space without apology? I wonder why they feel they can do this? Can you see how framing concerns in such a way that they can be overlooked minimises the 'space' that you take up? I've often done this myself – added 'just' or 'hope you don't mind' – and I'm slowly recognising that it speaks from a much less powerful position. Similarly, we accept the constant speed and busyness of our lives as if it could never be any other way, but I really think we need to slow down, wouldn't you agree?

I want you to know that I am willingly giving you my full attention. I am not too busy to consider your concerns; you have a right to take up space. I appreciate your honesty about the challenges of speaking up and I empathise sincerely with your lingering sense of insecurity. I'd like to pause and ask, what does it mean to *speak up*?

It is interesting that you are keen to make a difference, and certainly, speaking up can do this. Speaking up means standing out – to be louder, clearer, more conspicuous – making a difference. This can be an emotionally uncomfortable place to be because there are risks involved in speaking up. When you talk about speaking up you very specifically relate this to your workplace. Can you think of any other spaces where you find speaking up easier? What is it about these moments – do you have allies alongside you, or you are advocating for others rather than yourself?

The potential consequences of speaking up in the workplace, as you state around losing your job, bring huge anxieties around income and associated stress. I can see that you are familiar with these circumstances, having had temporary living and working arrangements in the past. I know you're not looking for sympathy – but stress is stress and you are acutely aware of the costs that this brings – so I can see why you would want to avoid this again. The losses you are scared of in your letter are significant, social determinants of health and wellbeing: housing, employment, income, social networks, and control over ones' circumstances. Your unwillingness to rock the boat back then was a rational response to precarity – and I'm very reluctant to say that the responsibility for speaking up about this and other issues in your past lies with you – please be kind to your former self, as I know you will be to future persons who find themselves in a similar precarious position. You talk about performing the role of the

‘good girl’, this is understandable and I hope you can release yourself from any feminist guilt you might be feeling. You were doing what you needed to do to survive.

This brings me to your question about what you might do with the job security that you hold now: I think your empathy and understanding about precarity is your feminist power here. Perhaps this could mean speaking up for others when you recognise that they cannot because of precarity. Could you be a feminist ally to those who have to perform the ‘good girl’ routine? Could you challenge structural inequalities (*no mean feat I realise*), and encourage your colleagues to do the same, by calling out insecure contracts? Precarious contracts often require a support infrastructure of friends and family, economic capital, and geographic mobility. Perhaps you and I could try to support a liveable wage through research contracts that last long enough to do all that is required in a study, when writing research bids? All too often we see that it is a race to the bottom to prove a bid to be ‘cost-effective’, but in the end, the precarious researchers suffer – and we could do things differently.

As for the insidious fear, I’m not going to pretend I have any answers but know that you are not alone. I think it is worth saying that it will take time to untangle the fear from the threat you have understandably attached to the consequence of speaking up at work. But for the time being, try to flip this: what would be the best outcome that could happen by speaking up now? Remember you are *not* precarious anymore!

Yours, as someone who is still trying to learn to ‘speak up’,

A Feminist Ally

The Over-promoted Professor

Dear Imposter Agony Aunts,

I’m in desperate need of advice. I’ve been a professor for 25 years and I *still* don’t feel like I know what I’m talking about. I’m an expert in my field and likely to be promoted to senior management before retirement, which will be very comfortable. I have a six figure salary. I’ve given three keynotes at well-renowned international conferences this semester and at each one I’ve felt more nervous than ever. I’m convinced that I simply do not deserve all the prizes, funding, and awards I keep accumulating. As a pale male (although I hope not too stale) I’m

aware of my privilege. I wish I had been more collegial over the years, it was a lot easier for me to climb the promotions ladder than it is nowadays. What can I do with these feelings of inadequacy? I need to tackle this sense of undeserving-ness before my promotion.

Expectantly,

Pale Male

Dear Pale – not Stale? – Male,

I often hear about ‘imposter feelings’ from colleagues, often behind closed doors, in awkward encounters, in student evaluations (‘she doesn’t look like a lecturer?’, ‘is that her office, all to herself, hmmm?’), ‘what is she wearing, her skirt is too short!’). It is interesting to hear your imposter story while you expertly recount your authority (promotion, keynotes, senior management, accumulator of prizes and income). This doesn’t sound like words I hear when people, colleagues, describe their sense of being on the outside. I often hear of colleagues dropping out, ‘failing’, and opting out of a system that has failed them, but this doesn’t sound like you, it sounds like you are failing upwards...

I note your ascendancy and expectation to be ‘very comfortable’ in retirement. Such a comfort seems unimaginable for so many. Very few have a sense of career security and longevity, in the same well-paid profession, and many of your colleagues, especially in the early career, may well be out striking in the USS pensions, and pay and conditions, industrial disputes, while seeing their working life, and workload, extended far beyond your immanent retirement.

How are your feelings placed within broader structural economic injustices, of low-wages and benefits cuts, rising divisions between the rich and the poor, enduring gender pay gaps? Are you asking me to help you feel better?! Have you thought about who cares for academic lives, who typically does the labour of caring in the workplace, and in the home? Who do you care for?

As you move into (more) management you have active choices. I do not imagine you as an academic saviour, nor as a role model for future academics to emulate or aspire to. Instead I hope that you can do something else with your feelings:

- 1) De-centre your own story: *Feeling* like an imposter is not the same as *being* an imposter – occasional self-doubt is not the same as structures and sentiments colliding to push you out

- 2) Begin to practice the collegiality you say you've previously failed at. Go on a course, read a book. Showcase your colleagues' research and achievements. Lead the institution's 'equality and diversity' committee (and don't rely on BAME and women colleagues to do this work).
- 3) Support the UCU strikes, contribute to the hardship fund, withdraw your labour.
- 4) Do not accept the naming of a University building after you.

Pausing Perplexedly,

Feminist Advisor.

By way of conclusion...

We set out to explore how experimenting with *feminist imposter agony aunts* might challenge and disrupt individualising mechanisms that frame imposter syndrome as a personal problem – be it of confidence, anxiety or self-esteem – in a HE settings. In playing with writing and responding to 'problem page' letters we sought to make visible the ambivalent tensions that arise out of feminist frustrations with the dominant ways of inhabiting, and conceptualising, the insides and outsides of academia. In doing so we wonder if advice-giving formats in themselves might exert a limiting individual-level framework, encouraging an approach along the lines of *what can I do about this* or even *please solve this problem for me* rather than asking *what can we do together* or perhaps *what alternatives can we imagine and enact*. The prevailing propensity to treat imposterism as a universal yet personal problem is captured in some of the interplay back and forth between advice seeker and giver.

Writing advice-giving responses was often challenging and perplexing as we reached to stretch beyond individual level solutions, and nevertheless ended up repeating some well-worn advice *Just say no! Who can you talk to about this? Be kind to yourself! Support junior colleagues!* The letters bump up against the restricted possibilities of what 'we' can do in the face of enduring hierarchies and exclusions and well as looking for opportunities for transformative action and micro-political refusals. We have encouraged reflection about the embodiment and locatedness of our composite, fictionalised individuals and have underscored how not everyone experiences imposterism in the same way or purely for reasons of *failing to recognise their own success*. Imposter feelings – and centrally their socially structured experiential meanings – are various and unevenly distributed. The depoliticising of 'imposter syndrome' becomes

apparent in these uneasy dialogues as we begin to speak to the impact of educational inequality regimes, epistemic hierarchies and injustices on the advice-seekers' experiences and interpretation of imposterism.

Crafting advice-seeking letters too came with its own hesitations and tensions. We encountered an uneasiness associated with very differently positioned academics, with various social characteristics, identifying with – and *claiming* – an imposter positions. Our aim has not been to delineate who can legitimately claim and narrate their imposter experiences, and we maintain such policing would be inappropriate. The point is not to categorise some academics as the 'real' imposters and dismiss the others as fraudulent imposters *only feeling as if* they don't belong. Rather in this chapter we have been concerned with asking what happens in such claims, what and who is carried in narrating imposter problems and advice: whose experiences and need for advice are prioritised and whose experience and expertise is taken-for-granted? We end on the note of ambivalence that has characterised the process of writing this chapter together – still not quite sure of the analytical or political purchase of imposter 'syndrome'. *Talking about it* remains a necessary, potentially transformative strategy for feminists inhabiting the inequality regimes of academia. Our chapter has raised several notes of caution around *how* we talk about imposter syndrome as we stretch to collective and situate imposter experiences. Taking on the role of imposter agony aunts has shown us the difficulty – as well as the potential and necessity – of refusing individualised responses to systemic issues.

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