Symposium on Early Career International Law Academia: Am I an Imposter? Overcoming Doubt and Self-disbelief as an Early Career Researcher

By:

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I'm privileged that my time as an early career researcher (ECR) has been a positive experience. I've worked with and been helped by brilliant lawyers and researchers in a collegial, welcoming environment. I'm indebted to them for their time, knowledge, and guidance. Yet, despite this, since I began my doctoral research, I have the unshakable sense that I *simply do not belong* among these people.

Am I an imposter? And when will my colleagues discover that I'm a fraud?

What is Imposter Syndrome?

If you're an ECR, you're likely familiar with these feelings. This is because so-called 'imposter syndrome' is very common among ECRs and, indeed, even those well-established in their disciplines. In addition to feeling like you don't 'deserve' your success, it can also be characterised by a lack of self-belief, or a view that you're incompetent or otherwise lacking in intelligence.

The primary impact of these negative thoughts is on ECRs' emotional wellbeing, and they are no doubt contributing to the prevalence of mental illness among graduate students and researchers which is, unsurprisingly, much higher compared with the general population. Equally, this mindset may also affect ECRs' professional outcomes. Through conversations with colleagues, I've come to learn that many have avoided seeking out or taking on important opportunities owing to fears associated with imposter syndrome. I've certainly done this. For example, despite seeing calls for papers directly related to my area of research, I've been hesitant to submit abstracts because, to put it bluntly, "who am I to contribute to this important topic?". Many are therefore unlikely to be achieving their potential, despite having a clear capacity to make meaningful contributions to their subject.

What, then, are the possible reasons for the prevalence of imposter syndrome among ECRs? Two factors appear, to me, to provide some explanation – academic pressures, and the impact of inequality in the sector.

Pressure in Academia

Imposter syndrome is strongly linked to the inherent pressures that come with competitive environments. There are many in academia, but of significance is the pressure to publish. It is no secret that academic vacancies, in law or otherwise, are difficult to secure. As a consequence, many colleagues (myself included) place enormous amounts of pressure on themselves to publish in order to 'stand out'. This can be a tough hurdle when you're already of the opinion that your research is simply not good enough, let alone good enough to submit to a journal. Even after mustering courage to submit a piece, the peer review process entails exposure to criticism and rejection, which can reinforce feelings of doubt.

That is not to say that we shouldn't be concerned with publications *at all*. Quite the opposite: Becoming familiar and comfortable with sharing and

disseminating research is actually something I've found *helps* combat imposter syndrome. Rather, it is essential to remember that the amount that you have published *does not totally define you as an early career researcher*. Looking beyond publications, and trying to recognise the other important contributions you can make to your field is, in my view, vital for maintaining self-confidence.

The Role of Inequality and Marginalisation

It is also important to recognise the disproportionate effect that imposter syndrome has on those from marginalised groups. Indeed, the 1978 study that first coined the term 'imposter phenomenon' highlighted the role that 'sex-role stereotyping' plays in contributing to the issue. The same biases identified then, whilst not nearly as prominent, still continue to foster and exacerbate feelings of inadequacy in the workplace.

Inequality is likely to be a primary cause of imposter syndrome across the legal sector. Law as a subject was traditionally closed off to anyone who wasn't middle-class, white, and male. And whilst, in my own country (the UK), there has been progress in creating a more inclusive sector, many groups are still underrepresented, such as those who are disabled, Black, or Asian. Similarly, international law as a discipline has been developed largely by men with a focus on developed regions. As I suggest toward the end of this piece, there is still much to be done to even begin confronting this issue.

Strategies for Tackling Imposter Syndrome

A quick online search for 'Imposter Syndrome in academia' will yield numerous resources for dealing with the issue: The most popular search result, as well as this reflective piece, are both replete with sensible advice. To avoid simply echoing these, I want to reflect on my own experience and highlight two strategies that have personally made a difference for me.

As I've already suggested, becoming comfortable with sharing my research has been key for combatting self-doubt. The most valuable forums have been the ECR workshops and conferences facilitated by more experienced, supportive colleagues who have been kind enough to share their views and feedback on my work. Even more informal discussions, with other ECRs or my supervisors, have helped me develop confidence. Thus, gradually exposing myself to

constructive criticism from peers has been crucial.

The second strategy has been to try and recognise even the smallest of accomplishments. Of course, not every success warrants a grand celebration – simply acknowledging when something goes well is enough. Some positive feedback on a draft paper, or the acceptance of an abstract, for instance, should be a reason to say to yourself “maybe I do belong here!”.

The Need for Structural Changes

The usefulness of self-help advice is, nevertheless, limited. I suggest it’s probably unhelpful to propose that imposter syndrome is something *solely* for individuals to remedy, given that marginalised groups are more at risk of experiencing the phenomenon. This wrongly locates the problem with individual researchers, rather than on *the institution* of academia which, as explained, contributes to this issue. By failing to recognise this fact, some insightful academic-focused pieces, whilst otherwise helpful, do not offer system-wide suggestions for change.

Therefore, although I do not discredit the utility of my advice above, the biggest lessons here are for the academy as a whole. To achieve a more equal, inclusive academic community, and to ensure that *all* find a sense of belonging, there are two small things that the academic community can start doing from today.

First, we should ensure, in our own works, that we recognise the scholarly contributions of those from groups poorly represented in academia. Whilst this is applicable to all disciplines, it is especially pertinent in international legal scholarship. As Julia Emtseva rightly suggests, ‘[h]earing the voices of lawyers coming from different parts of the world is vital for international law. In the end, it is *international*’. By drawing on these diverse perspectives, and bringing them to the forefront of international legal scholarship, marginalised ECRs may come to recognise that they, too, are able to make worthy contributions to their field.

Second, we should strive to create inclusive environments. This can be achieved by, for instance encouraging the contribution and participation of those from underrepresented groups at postgraduate events. Establishing or joining networks is also an excellent way to initiate conversations between

scholars. Afronomicslaw, a forum for discussion on international law as it relates to Africa and the Global South, is a prime example of this. Creating a dialogue among researchers from diverse backgrounds and with varied perspectives can only have a positive impact on the development of scholarship in this area. It will, equally, further enable ECRs to attain a sense of belonging in academia.

Ultimately, regardless of what must be done, achieving diversity will require the collaboration of all ECRs. And being open about the issues we face in academia, in addition to those explored in this piece, is a necessary first step to achieving a more inclusive sector.

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