

Unblocking Scholarly Writing – Minimizing Imposter Syndrome and Applying Grit to Accomplish Publishing

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SC Classification Genre: Business

Citation: Berna, J. S. (2020). Unblocking scholarly writing – Minimizing imposter syndrome and applying grit to accomplish publishing. *Scholar Chatter*, 1(1), 1 – 7, <https://doi.org/10.47036/SC.1.1.1-7.2020>

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Abstract

Scholarly writing and publishing have many challenges. This White Paper explores one coping mechanism (imposter syndrome) that can block academic writing goals. A second aspect discussed, that moves beyond coping with the stress of scholarship and publishing, is a personal character strength (grit). Recommendations are offered to minimize the nagging imposter voice and shift and adhere to, the personal strength of grit to accomplish peer-reviewed journal publication goals.

Keywords: *Academic Publishing, Character Strength, Grit, Imposter Syndrome*

Introduction

White papers, by design, are a form of authoritative report to provide information, propose solutions, and guide readers to make a decision or solve a problem (Stanford Law School, n.d.). This article, first in a three-part series, is written to encourage and guide doctoral candidates and academic doctors (PhD or EdD), to transform their dissertations into publishable articles.

Background of Imposter Syndrome and Grit

Imposter syndrome is both a feeling and a psychological block to achieving professional goals. Defined as a "collection of feelings of inadequacy that persist despite evident success" (Corkindale, 2008), this coping mechanism can range from troublesome to paralyzing. Personal grit is also a psychological coping mechanism. However, grit goes beyond being a habitual approach to coping with stress, to positively contribute to goal achievement. Both imposter syndrome and grit are briefly explored in this White Paper, and recommendations are offered for scholars seeking to publish peer-reviewed articles from a completed dissertation.

Imposter Syndrome Discussion

One personal coping mechanism, which can cause procrastination in academic writing, is called Imposter Syndrome (Bothello & Roulet, 2018). There are now more than forty years of research since the seminal work of Clance and Imes' (1978) on the "imposter phenomenon in high achieving women." Most recently, Bothello and Roulet's (2018) article, *Mis-representation of Self in Academic Life*, was cited in Laura Empson's (2020) whimsically titled journal article in the Academy of Management Learning and Education, *The Emperor's New Clothes: How our Fear of Seeming Stupid Became a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy*.

Imposter syndrome shows up, for junior scholars, as a sense of anxiety and self-doubt about the legitimacy of their profession or position within it (Bothello & Roulet, 2018). In exaggerated instances, a sense of anomie can advance to living in constant fear of losing credibility or being exposed as a charlatan (Bothello & Roulet, 2018). As a maverick in my family of origin system, the only one to attend and graduate with a four-year degree (and then never stop going to college), and having my first tenure track position at barely age 25, I can personally attest to "questioning the status, legitimacy, and rewards conferred in a highly-competitive scholarly community" (Bothello & Roulet, 2018), as part of feeling an imposter in academia. Many junior scholars claim no interest in "ever writing again," as they near or finish their terminal degree requirements. In my early career, the surprise and impact of being overlooked as a major contributing author (Smoczyk & Dedmon, 1985), when the corporate medical physician's name became the second author without any contribution, considerably stalled my own interest in "ever writing to publish" again. Specifically focusing on two of three legs of academic scholars (service and teaching, but not published scholarship), my track record to early tenured status became stalled.

Imposter Syndrome Recommendations

"We are reminded we became academics to solve problems," so contended Bothello and Roulet (2018). Those two researchers also purported that collegial supportiveness is pivotal to up-ending or ending imposter syndrome. Both formal and informal support systems help decrease anxiety, quiet *the imposter within*, and aid in recognizing the value in both one's profession and oneself (Bothello & Roulet, 2018).

It took Desiree Dickerson (2019) leaving academia to become, in her words, a "well being" and academic resilience coach at workshops across Europe to quiet the imposter syndrome voice in her own internal dialogue. Initially, her list of recommendations was stimulated by reading the book, *Mindfulness – An Eight-Week Plan for Finding Peace in a Frantic World* (Williams & Penman, 2011). Beyond mindfulness practices, Dickerson's (2019) suggestions incorporate several cognitive-behavioral techniques:

- Beliefs and mindset feed your self-talk – feed yourself positive thinking.
- Turn down the volume on your perfectionism dial.
- Have self-compassion for setbacks.
- Be-friend your self – talk to yourself as you would a good friend.
- Challenge the behaviors of avoidance and procrastination.
- Disrupt the downward spiraling cycle of self-doubt.

By practicing cognitive-behavioral techniques, including mindfulness meditation, it is possible to disrupt mind wandering and snap back to on-task writing endeavors. It is possible to reduce emotional reactivity to perceived or actual critical feedback. Authors should be less preoccupied with the progress of others (Dickerson, 2019) and focus on the strengths you do bring to the writing table.

As this article was going to publication, a Facebook group posting (ABD All But Dissertation Support Group private by-invite online group) ruminated about feelings of being an imposter, trying to be an academic, and remarked on the energy drain experienced when writing a Chapter 2 literature review (Alloway, 2020). Quickly, more than a dozen people responded, with as many male as female voices able to identify with those remarks. The tone of the remarks was both humorous and painful to read. One woman researched the imposter phenomenon for her dissertation as a way to cope with her own feelings of phoniness. Another woman remarked about the mind being the greatest distraction and encouraged a mindset shift to see oneself as a scholar.

Restructuring and prioritizing daily activities that align with your circadian high energy periods, and incorporating basics such as sleep and exercise, all contribute to vital energy for productive writing. Muting parts of your inner voice (Dickerson, 2019), particularly the harsh *inner critic*, can silence the nagging voice of perfection, worry, guilt, or fear that zap and steal energy. Creating a positive mental space can "free up (energy) to think, create, be present, ask questions, learn, and relax" (Dickerson, 2019).

Gill Corkindale (2008) offers several concise strategies to quiet the frustration or anxiety of feeling like an academic imposter. These include these strategies for successful publication authorship (Corkindale, 2008).

- Recognize imposter feelings when they emerge – consider the context.
- Rewrite your mental program (mindset) – catch and reframe your thinking.
- Reframe failure as a learning experience.
- Be kind to your self – seek support.
- Visualize success.

Dr. Julie (Dr. Jules) Conzelmann, CEO and sole proprietor of Scholar Chatter (www.scholar chatter.com), has recently published a two-volume book set as guides for writing and editing dissertations and theses. Incorporating the philosophy of "*Keep It Simple Scholars*" (Conzelmann, 2016, 2020), Dr. Jules encourages junior scholars to move forward in publishing from their completed dissertation. Similarly, Scholar Chatter Honorary Advisory Board (HAB) Members supported the same encouragement in an inaugural White Paper, *Four Perspective of Disruption in Publication: An Inspirational White Paper* (Conzelmann et al., 2020), downloadable for reading on the Scholar Chatter website link (www.scholar chatter.com/2020publications). At Scholar Chatter, the offer for guidance goes beyond a traditional editor role, as the editorial and advisory board members are well versed in mentoring to holistically support scholarship and journal authorship success.

Personal Grit Discussion

Another coping mechanism – the personal strength of grit (Duckworth, 2016) can help a potential, but procrastinating, academic author actually get to the *just published* point of converting a completed dissertation into a peer-reviewed journal article. Public inkling of the importance of 'grit' goes back to a late 1960's novel "*True Grit*" (Portis, 1968), that received Hollywood attention in the (1969) movie rendition, starring actor John Wayne, and in the 2010 revisionist western film (McMullin, 2017), starring actor Jeff Bridges. More recent public references to grit include Clear (n.d.), Duckworth and Quinn (2009), and Quast (2017).

In my professional health and wellness coaching capacity, I wrote and published a case study (Berna, 2013) about a mid-life diabetic male who showed up with some personal characteristics of *grit*, yet, failed to achieve his desired health change goals. In several regards, this person appeared resilient, yet, that was not enough to carry him through to successful goal completion. That would have taken *grit*.

Grit, according to Duckworth (2016), is the perseverance and passion for long-term goals. And grit is an essential ingredient for academic success (Lexia Learning, n.d.). While it is not necessarily those goals that change the world, grit provides the steady-on-course perseverance not to abandon goal-oriented tasks in the face of obstacles (Lexia Learning, n.d.). Gritty people consistently work toward their goals and overcome adversity to accomplish great things (Lexia Learning, n.d.). As an academic, it is a *great thing* to turn one's dissertation into a publishable article – or two – or three. Beyond resilience, grit requires the need to nurture consistent passion over the long term. Gritty people choose to devote their time and effort to

pursue and overcome obstacles to do so. Certainly, most anyone who has persisted in successful completion and defense of a dissertation has demonstrated grit.

Applying Personal Grit Recommendations

Writing a publishable article from a dissertation includes the very basics of writing from an outline and suppressing the urge to procrastinate. It begins with the first steps of putting pen to paper – or opening your laptop to a Word document and setting aside the fear of *the blank page*. It also entails perseverance and personal grit to accomplish this goal. The good news is that you are not beginning from a blank page, as you strive to convert your dissertation into publishing requirements for order, format, length, and details (see, for example, journal formatting template at Scholar Chatter's website (www.scholarchatter.com)).

Incorporating seven character strengths (VIA Institute on Character, n.d.), Lexia Learning (n.d.) designed a model mentoring approach supporting an engaged, happy, and successful life. Along with grit, these strengths include the following 6 of 24-character strengths (VIA Institute on Character, n.d.).

- Zest – enthusiastic and energetic participation in life.
- Grit – perseverance and passion for long-term goals.
- Optimism – confidence in a future full of positive possibilities.
- Self-Control – capacity to regulate one's own responses to align with short- and long-term goals.
- Gratitude – appreciation for the benefits received from others and desire to express thanks.
- Social intelligence – understanding the feelings of others and adapting actions accordingly.
- Curiosity – eagerness to explore new things with openness.

Look back at your dissertation writing journey. In doing so, your retrospective, reflective thinking may help you recognize the many ways you actually incorporated each of those seven character strengths to be conferred, *Phinally Done* (DBA, DHA, DM, DNP, EdD, MD, PhD, PsyD, and more). Of course, you realize that was not the end of your journey – as you now seek to become a published author by adapting your dissertation into publishable peer-reviewed journal articles. And – it is with these character strengths continuing to lead, that your writing efforts will be rewarded with your goal completion to become a published journal author. You do have grit – and what it takes to do so.

In a Facebook support group posting in the Doctoral Dissertation Cohort, recently conferred Dr. Javetta Jones Roberson, Ed.D., (2020) succinctly quoted Maya Angelou (1978) "Bringing the gifts my Ancestors gave I am the dream and hope... I rise... I rise... I rise," in celebration of her doctoral commencement celebration. And as that event was delayed, yet unstoppable, by the Covid19 pandemic, so are scholars who apply the personal grit and life skills they polished to a shining gleam along their doctoral journey. These are the skills that also

contribute to the successful publishing of an academic journal article. You have these skills already within you. Now, put pen to paper!

Sidebar Notes

The second article in this White Paper series will address the coping mechanism of procrastination and the positivity focus of a mindset shift. The third article will report the results of an online poll of published and yet-to-publish scholars and their recommendations for achieving scholarly writing goals.

Selected examples of online/private by-invite support groups for doctoral candidates:

- ABD (All But Dissertation Support Group)
- Dissertation Headache Solutions
- Doctoral Dissertation Cohort
- Doctor's Journal Article Publishing Networking Group
- Doctoral Mom Group
- Doctoral Scholar Community Connection

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