

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Ten years later – Associate Professor Adam Lynes (and Imposter)

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PhD Topic: Adam's PhD topic was centred on the occupational choices of British serial murderers, with a particular focus on those who held predominantly driving-focused professions.

Introduction: Where to Start?

In attempting to plan and ultimately write this chapter centred on the theme of imposter syndrome post PhD, my thoughts repeatedly return to my recent attendance at the 2023 European Society of Criminology conference that took place in Florence, Italy. Yes, Florence is as beautiful and vibrant as we are told it is, full of culture, history and, most importantly, mouth-wateringly exquisite food. Looking back as I sit to write this chapter, I cherish the conversations and friendships I was fortunate to have and to build, and the memories that will not quickly fade, including me and a fellow colleague asking locals if they could help us work out how the cigarette vending machines worked; visiting the local community swimming pool; eating gelato as we admired the beautiful architecture of the Baptistery of St. John and, of course, attending a variety of interesting panels.

On the face of it, this all sounds fantastic, and, indeed, I recognise the extremely lucky situation to be in when my employer funds me to attend such events. However, the lingering, sickening anticipation and dread of my panel talk are splintered deep within such memories – stuck between these moments of joy. I had arrived in Florence on a Tuesday, and unlike some of my more fortunate peers, my panel was not until Friday afternoon. Upon reflection, these positive memories were always corrupted somewhat with this very feeling of terror that, despite all my rationalisations of all the experiences I have since acquired post-PhD, could never fully quell. I distinctly remember telling myself, “*Stop doubting yourself. Think of all the lectures you have given, look at the books and articles you have published – just stop doubting yourself and enjoy the moment!*” Despite all this internal pep-talk, however, the nagging voice would always return, often accompanied by brief visions of some unidentifiable person standing at the back of the room – most likely some distinguished professor - declaring my ideas and work were “redundant”, “shallow”, “simplistic” and of course, “simply wrong”.

As I write this, I picture this voice as dwelling deep within in a cave, occasionally coming up for air and sustenance in the form of my, for lack of a better phrase, positive energy. These visions I mentioned would manifest and take the form relevant to whatever moment I was worried and anxious about, such as, for example, the faceless professor decrying my lack of academic worth, the student laughing as I stumble over the next complex academic terminology, the dean stressing that what I have accomplished the past year just not being good enough and, now the most common, the reviewer who lambasts a paper or research bid I have spent months pouring my heart and soul into. For the last example, the following words are repeated repeatedly: “*I just do not see the relevance of this, and it has zero*

impact". These voices and accompanying visions would naturally get more frequent and visceral as whatever moment I dreaded drew closer. For Instance, whilst I am, this moment, enjoying writing this chapter, the little pit in my stomach can already be felt, "*Will anyone actually like this?*" "*Am I pitching this right?*" "*How will my academic peers react? Will they now see me as a fraud?*".

Ultimately, whilst I know I am not alone in feeling like an imposter weighed down by self-doubt, perhaps my biggest worry comes in the form of a new vision whereby a crowd of academics filled with familiar faces I have come to know and call friends seeing "behind the curtain", so to speak, and disappearing like the dad wandering into the local for the first-time post-divorce. However, despite these feelings bubbling to the surface, I hope this chapter provides some comfort to those who share similar feelings and to know they are not alone. I will begin this reflection all the way back to 2006 and trace key moments that spring to mind when I think of imposter syndrome. This may be rather chaotic, which I do apologise to the reader for; however, when reflecting on such emotive themes, time and space tend to become jumbled into a cacophony of feelings, faces, and moments.

Tracing the Origins of My Imposter Syndrome

Before university, I was an average student, often receiving positive yet unremarkable reports from teachers who noted I could apply myself more. Like many, I had no clear career path, certainly not in academia or criminology (I wasn't even aware it existed!). Initially, I dreamed of becoming a marine biologist, fuelled by a fascination with sharks after watching *Jaws* (1975) with my grandfather. He noticed my enthusiasm and gave me an old book on sharks, which I devoured, captivated by the mysteries of the ocean. However, my dream faded when I realised the top grades in natural sciences required for such a career were out of reach for me. Despite my middling grades, my parents were always supportive, with my dad assuring me, "*Doctor or street-sweeper – we would love you all the same*". I recognise how fortunate I am to have such support, something not everyone has. My grandfather's gift also sparked a love for reading, leading me from the ocean's allure to the fantastical worlds of Charles Dickens, Arthur C. Clarke, Isaac Asimov, and Philip K. Dick, where I found comfort and solace.

After my marine biology dream faded, I had no clear career aspirations. I moved through school without a specific plan, eventually enrolling in my local sixth-form college for A-Levels. When asked about my future, I vaguely responded, "*Not sure, but I'd like to do something that helps people.*" Due to my love of reading, I applied to study English Literature at various universities but didn't invest much time researching courses or campuses. Many can relate to the lack of encouragement to think critically in school, where the focus was on memorising content for exams to boost pass rates for league tables (Leckie & Goldstein, 2017). While I now appreciate teachers' challenges, I believe this approach reduces students to mere statistics, leaving them unprepared for university life and, indeed, the university of life. As I prepared for my A-Levels, the prevailing feeling was one of vagueness, like walking in a direction without a destination.

Everything changed one cold winter night in 2006. I had formed an unlikely friendship with two former secondary school classmates, and we decided to visit a nightclub rumoured not to check IDs. Excitedly, we planned how to get past the bouncers, what drinks to buy with our limited cash, and if there would be girls. The night was mostly uneventful—we got in, had a few beers, and mingled. However, as the night wound down, one of my friends argued with

an older, clearly drunk patron. My other friend and I intervened to de-escalate, and it seemed resolved with apologies exchanged. As we left the club near midnight, debating how to get home, I noticed my friends' eyes widen as they stepped back. Before I could react, the drunk customer punched me in the gut. At first, I felt no pain, just a struggle to breathe. Then, one of his friends punched me in the face, knocking out a tooth and dislodging another. The assailants fled into the night. Stunned, I fixated on my mouth, holding my tooth and despairing that I'd only removed my braces a week before. As my adrenaline faded, I noticed a wet spot on my shirt and realised I was bleeding. Panic set in as the intense pain hit me. I will spare further details, but I later discovered that the older guys, angry from the earlier argument, had returned, and I had taken the full brunt of their attack. To this day, I still don't know why they singled me out.

When I think back to that night, I am reminded of the film *Sliding Doors* (1998), a story about parallel universes and how our lives can drastically change and diverge down different paths depending on events and our decisions. What if I decided not to spark a friendship with those two lads? What if I decided not to go out that night? Regardless, the subsequent weeks and months after that night are painful to recall physically and emotionally. I grew up in Handsworth, an area known for significant economic inequality and high crime rates. Yet, this moment completely shattered my sense of security, and I remember being angry that I let this happen. Hospitals and police visits were routine, and all this time, A-Levels became less and less of a priority. Before this took place, I had already applied to several universities based on my predicted grades. Still, if I am being honest, this was done largely because I had no idea what I actually wanted to do, and, naturally, this was not enough for me to keep my studies in mind within the context of what I was going through. I fell behind, was apathetic, and remember drinking more to cope with the pain. I also found solace and peace in my books, in fantastical imaginary worlds where I could temporarily escape.

As months passed, I sat my exams, knowing my heart wasn't in it. While at the airport with my family, my mom handed me her phone with my results. My heart sank as I saw how far I had fallen from my predicted grades. Despite my lack of effort, I hadn't expected to miss my target by such a large margin. My plans for the future were shattered, and my confidence crumbled. Although I was still accepted into Aberystwyth University for English Literature, the experience planted the seeds of imposter syndrome that would follow me for years.

University Life and Alienation

While I remember being excited at the prospect of leaving Birmingham and moving to the coastal town of Aberystwyth (a population of around 14,000 compared to Birmingham's 1 million), there was a nagging feeling at the back of my mind. From packing my bags and saying goodbye to school friends to being driven by my parents across the Welsh countryside, I distinctly remember thinking that I perhaps did not deserve this opportunity, that the University must have made an administration error, and that I would be sent packing straight back to Birmingham. As we drove towards the campus and up the infamous and locally referred to Cardiac Hill (it is so steep that lorries are advised not to drive on it), I recall that nagging feeling manifesting into palpable sweat. Along with the sense that I did not really belong, I was about to say goodbye to my parents and everything I knew for the past 18 years – my entire life up to that point.

I vividly recall the day my parents dropped me off at university, marking the start of a challenging journey. Soon after they left, I joined fellow students in my residence hall, where names and drinks were exchanged. Among these early encounters, I was nicknamed the “*slow Brummie*” by my more southern, “well-spoken” peers. While I laughed it off, the label deepened my imposter syndrome, making me feel like a fraud among brighter minds.

This insecurity was magnified in my first seminar, where I admittedly struggled to keep up. A friend from halls, who had boasted of being an “academic prodigy,” was in the same seminar, further intensifying my anxiety. The session focused on a Geoffrey Chaucer poem, and as the tutor asked each student for their thoughts, I felt increasingly out of my depth. When my turn finally came, I couldn’t even grasp the question until it was rephrased multiple times. My peers’ amused and astonished looks made me feel utterly inadequate, reinforcing the “slow Brummie” label in my mind.

As the semester progressed, winter was accompanied by lots (and lots) of rain and storms that turned the once-calm waves into violent currents that clashed against the pier. Desperate to fit in and block out the sense of inadequacy, I spent much of my time in the local pubs socialising with those in my halls of residence. I had accepted the moniker of the “slow Brummie” and performed to this label for cheap laughs and a sense of being accepted. I also spent little time studying, as doing so just brought up all the negative feelings I desperately tried to avoid and block out. In creating this what I call “shield of denial”, I infrequently attended my scheduled classes as I could not face the prospect of more laughter or ridicule. Looking back almost 16 years later, I now understand that many of my student peers benefited from private schooling and tuition. My experiences at school and college did not prepare me or give me the necessary skills for individual learning. However, I lacked this perspective and understanding and was afraid to be honest with myself, let alone anyone else, including an authority figure such as a lecturer.

During my first two years of undergraduate study, I barely scraped by, passing most modules but keeping my poor performance a secret from friends and family. I justified my lack of effort with excuses like, “*I don't really study*” and “*What do you expect when you go out so much?*” This mindset—avoiding effort to avoid disappointment—dominated my early university experience. However, things began to shift in my third year when I chose an optional module on science fiction, a genre I love. The topics excited me, but the module leader and seminar tutor truly changed my approach to academia. In one of the first seminars, we discussed Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968). I read the assigned book thoroughly for the first time, filling it with notes. Whilst I was nervous in the seminar, the tutor’s relaxed and humorous approach put me at ease. When it was my turn to speak, I had a lot to say but was hesitant. The tutor noticed my apprehension, smiled encouragingly, and gave me time to express myself. Despite my frustration with my delivery, they reassured me with a smile and said, “Some excellent points there, Adam; good work.”

Once the seminar was over, the tutor walked over to me and said they would like to have a quick meeting in their office. While I was nervous, their tone was positive, so I followed them down the corridor to their office. In this meeting, they noted that they did not recognise me from other modules, and from that, I started to list all the numerous reasons as to why I had been neglecting my studies. I do not know why I felt I could be honest with them. Maybe it was because they were the first lecturer to notice and show interest. Maybe it was because I needed to release all this built-up insecurity and frustration that had been bubbling under the surface over the past three years. They were understanding, and what really sticks with me to

this day was when they said, “*Look, you have potential...keep at it*”. While it was not the silver bullet for my insecurities, I left their office feeling like a weight had been lifted. I spent the remainder of the year applying myself to my studies, and, to my surprise, I enjoyed it. I spent less and less time going out with friends and drinking, so I decided to go to the gym and spend my time in the university library. I could not completely reverse the damage done over the past couple of years, but I completed my degree with a 2.1 in English Literature.

A Return to Academia and the Resurgence of Imposter Syndrome

I returned to Birmingham with my degree certificate in English Literature and a renewed sense of optimism. To be clear, at this point, I had no interest or inclination to continue in academia, having instead decided to pursue a career in the Police. As I mentioned earlier, I had always wanted to work in a profession that helped others. As I reflect on that fateful night in West Bromwich, I think I wanted to help others who lived through similar experiences or, ideally, prevent it from happening to them. However, this was in 2010, and due to the new coalition government’s approach to cuts to public spending (Disney & Simpson, 2017), there was a freeze on recruitment. “*Never mind*”, I remember thinking; I could instead join the Specials on a volunteer basis and gain the necessary experience. I took part in the assessment process but was informed that despite doing well, they could not even provide uniforms due to budget constraints. I resolved to see this through, so I decided to try to wait for this pause in recruitment to end. In the meantime, I applied for countless jobs ranging from a library assistant (at Birmingham City University, no less) to a security guard, but I received no responses.

With no job prospects, I searched for a qualification that might improve my chances of joining the police once recruitment resumed. Living close to BCU’s Perry Barr campus, I found a Criminology master’s program that seemed perfect for policing and affordable with my criminal compensation money. Accepted into the course due to my degree classification, I felt optimistic - things were finally moving forward. I also cannot recall the usual imposter syndrome feelings during my master’s. The lecturers were supportive, and I connected with the discipline in a way I hadn’t during my undergraduate years. I was no longer labelled the “slow Brummie,” and my lack of criminology background wasn’t criticised. In one of my first essays, a professor’s feedback changed my life; they noted I had a “*nice writing style*.” This shocked me, and encouraged by this feedback, I started attending morning breakfast sessions with the faculty, eager to learn as much as possible. This experience starkly contrasted with my undergraduate years, and I made sure to seize every opportunity to grow academically.

As my master’s program neared its end, the professor who had praised my writing suggested I consider a PhD, expanding on my dissertation project. This suggestion was a pivotal moment for me, presenting two possible paths: academia or joining the police. I often wondered where I would be if I had chosen the latter, especially during challenging times like heavy marking seasons or paper rejections. Despite my excitement and acceptance of the opportunity, old insecurities resurfaced. Why pursue a PhD when I was so close to realising my long-standing goal of joining the police? This question often troubled me, and my answer would vary depending on my mood. Reflecting now, I realise that the professor’s belief in my potential was crucial to my decision. Additionally, the desire to make my family proud influenced me. As a first-generation university graduate, I was motivated by my father’s unfulfilled dream of further education, which his parents had discouraged in favour of immediate employment. The professor’s encouragement opened up new possibilities for me,

suggesting that I could achieve more and, perhaps, finally, overcome my inner doubts. Unfortunately, my struggle with imposter syndrome continued despite this encouragement, and my expectations were not fully met.

Dr Adam Lynes, Associate Professor in Criminology and Impostor

Apologies for the abrupt time jump; the preceding chapters have all done a far better job explaining the numerous and complex challenges one can face when undertaking a PhD in the Social Sciences. Instead, given my rather unique position of completing my PhD 10 years ago, I wished to explore the origins of my imposter syndrome. My relationship with this feeling, I hope I have demonstrated, is a long and complicated one based on a myriad of decisions and life events – some I could control and others not so much. As will likely be no surprise, my imposter syndrome returned and was further compounded during my PhD. Looking back to this time, almost every facet of my experience only nourished those cave-dwelling voices. From the high standards and expectations, constant evaluations (in terms of research and teaching), and lack of clear guidelines to the overwhelming sense of isolation – when meshed together, you have a very potent environment for imposter syndrome to flourish. This is before even getting into the ever-increasing neo-liberalisation of higher education (Winlow, 2022), whereby academic community and intellectual curiosity have been supplanted with intense competition, ego, and the return to the dreaded league tables such as in the form of the National Student Survey, Teaching Excellence Framework and the Research Excellence Framework. I am by no means immune to these cultural changes. The irony is not lost on me when teaching students the concept of *amour propre* (simply put, a sense of one's worth) and how our current political economy means this is now predicated on the downfall and failures of others (Rousseau, 1990; see also Hall *et al.*, 2008). During my PhD years, I recall the distinctly mixed emotions of seeing others flourish and struggle and how I felt bad at the former and better at the latter when comparing my progress. It is important to stress here that this is a feeling that still exists even all these years later, and while I do my best to rationalise and quieten such thoughts, that voice in my head that tells me I am not good enough still fuels those knee-jerk reactions and emotions. I would not readily admit this in person and around my colleagues and peers, but to ignore it would be disingenuous of me and unfair to those reading this.

Reflecting on both the PhD journey and the years since passing the viva, I think another important factor I have only begun to understand is the relationship between my sense of self-worth and external validation. I believe that the need for others to recognise our potential or work is universal and extends beyond the walls of academia. However, I can now more clearly see how the nature of higher education only exacerbated my insecurities and need for validation from outside sources. If I chart the defining moments of my career, I can recall a familiar mantra I remember telling myself repeatedly: “*Once I get X, I will have made it, and I will finally believe in myself*”. This mantra would naturally evolve over the years, including obtaining my Doctorate, getting my first peer-reviewed article accepted, getting promoted, having my monograph published, and, most recently, attempting to secure my first grant (at the time of writing this one is still eluding me). Each success, I thought, would be accompanied by the retreat and banishment of my insecurities and feelings of being an imposter. Unfortunately, these successes only seemed to make them worse, that I was, in fact, only making it more difficult for myself to hide and conceal my flaws as I moved from being an Early Career Academic and into more senior roles with more significant responsibilities. If I were to close my eyes and visualise this process, it would not be so far removed from a gladiator about to step out into a Roman Colosseum. Each achievement was a vital piece of

my armour as I would prepare for battle against my enemies – in this case, the aggressive peer-reviewer, disgruntled student, and faceless professor. The mid-module student feedback was my braces; the glowing peer review was my chest plate; my monograph was my helmet; and my PhD certificate was my trusty shield. Of course, no Roman Colosseum would be complete without the all-powerful Emperor observing from up high, dispensing either life to those who impress or death to those who failed to excite or win over the crowd's adoration. This important figure, naturally, would be the Dean. However, in reality, by holding such an external endorsement so highly yet my own internal validation so low, I was, in fact, not building up my defences but instead making myself far more vulnerable than I realised at the time.

Only ten years after the PhD have I finally begun to reflect on what motivates me and why I struggle to feel a sense of belonging in academia. I believe I better understand the key moments that fuelled such sentiments, yet much work remains to be done. I am still susceptible to seeking external validation and need to remind myself that any feedback, good or bad, is not reflective of me as a person. I also need to remind myself that all of the feelings associated with feeling like an imposter will never be quelled while I continue to seek validation beyond myself. I think I can confidently state that if I were to secure a significant grant or be published in the highest-ranking journal in the discipline, these feelings would not only remain but only get worse! In many ways, I suppose writing this is a meaningful step in the right direction. Perhaps embracing vulnerability and lowering the proverbial shield I usually hold high when I write anything related to academia is the path towards embracing imperfection instead of the perfectionism we crave and are taught to achieve.

The one thing I do hope for is to use my experiences to help others. In discussing my plans for this chapter, one of my PhD students and co-editors for this book, Sarah Jones, pointed out that they have observed how I often approach students who are perhaps not engaging or talking in seminars and workshops. They explained how I would “*see the 18-year-old Adam who needed support and encouragement*”. This was somewhat revelatory to me when they said this and, if I am being honest, emotional. However, it made perfect sense, and I suppose I ended up in a profession in a roundabout way that provided me with the means to help others. Perhaps imposter syndrome does not always have to be negative and, if understood and channelled in the right direction, can instead be an empowering means to relate and ultimately aid others on their own journeys, including pursuing their own PhD.

Remember, You are Not Alone

In bringing this chapter to a close, I always fear still being that mortified 18-year-old who messed up their A-Levels and the “slow Brummie” who expected to be removed from university and who never really felt like they fitted in with the other, well-spoken, and better-educated students. To say I have, ten years after the PhD, the answers to overcoming imposter syndrome would be a lie. If I were asked to write on this topic only a couple of years ago, I would have attempted to convey a sense of overcoming such concerns and a series of well-ordered recommendations on how to incorporate them into the lives of others. However, as hopefully demonstrated via this brief journey into my imposter syndrome, each person's story and relationship with such feelings are unique, and each person needs to find ways that support their ability to navigate the academic environment – both during and after the PhD. If there is one morsel of guidance based on my experiences, it is that you have to come to terms with and accept that such feelings are likely not to go away anytime soon and

that seeking external validation – be it via passing the PhD or becoming Professor – will likely not be the elixir we may be led to believe. To demonstrate this, we must return to where this all began: Florence, Italy.

Friday, the day of my talk, finally arrived. The voices that dwelled in the back of my mind had only intensified, and the visions of the faceless professor at the back of the room lambasting my presentation had only become more lucid and visceral. I contemplated pretending to be sick, that *“I really want to deliver my talk but just not feeling well”*. To pass the time, a couple of the academics I had met invited me to have a coffee at one of the local restaurants. Seeing the look of worry on my face, one of these academics, renowned professor Daniel Briggs, whom I had only met a couple of days before, asked if I was all right, and that *“I looked like I was staring into some abyss”*. I brushed off their question and attempted to portray the sense of confidence I had learned to emulate in my early PhD years – to mask the imperfections. They took a sip of their espresso and simply replied, *“You know what, Adam, I often feel at these conferences like I don’t belong...like I’m not smart enough or well-published to be in the same room as some of these people”*. As I have previously stated, I am aware that many of the feelings I have discussed are not unique to me, but it was the way this professor, someone whom I had idolised from reading their work, opened up at that moment. This individual, who could have easily been the faceless professor who haunted my visions, told me about their background, their sense of alienation at various universities, and feelings of never quite living up to standards that, as they explained, were put on themselves. We spoke for at least an hour about how neither of us felt like we belonged and shared similar nerves and anxieties about various academic scenarios, especially conferences. We finished our drinks, and I returned to the conference venue off the back of this heart-to-heart. My talk was not perfect; I suffered from the dreaded “dry mouth” and had to rush through my slides due to the timing, but I enjoyed it all the same.

I suppose the message is clear here: Most, if not all, of us - regardless of our respective stages of career or experience - have this shared imposter syndrome. However, I think the more important message is that it is okay to talk about this with others and occasionally let the guard or, more aptly, shield down. Perhaps if we did, we would no longer feel like imposters.

Summary of Reflections

As you navigate your PhD journey and beyond, you may often feel like an imposter, doubting your place among a sea of highly accomplished individuals. This chapter, rooted in my personal experiences, hopefully serves as a reminder that you are not alone in these feelings. Whether surrounded by peers who seem more knowledgeable, facing critical feedback from supervisors, or dreading the scrutiny of an external examiner, it is important to recognise that even those who appear confident have likely felt the same at some point in their own academic journey.

Imposter syndrome is a universal experience that affects not just students but also established academics and, yes, even literary titans such as Neil Gaiman. Gaiman reflected on imposter syndrome when they recounted how they were fortunate to receive an invitation to a gathering of remarkable individuals - artists, scientists, writers, and pioneers of discovery. Throughout the event, they could not shake the feeling that, at any moment, the others might realise they did not truly belong among those who had accomplished so much. During this event, Gaiman struck a conversation with arguably one of the most famous people in the world, Neil Armstrong. Armstrong, made famous for being the first human to ever land on the Moon, confessed to Gaiman that they also felt like a fraud amongst the crowd. After this brief

exchange between the two men, Gaiman would go on to say that he felt better: *“Because if Neil Armstrong felt like an imposter, maybe everyone did. Maybe there weren’t any grown-ups, only people who had worked hard and also got lucky and were slightly out of their depth, all of us doing the best job we could, which is all we can really hope for.”*

As you progress in your academic career or decide to enter other fields, remember that self-doubt is a common thread that binds us all. Embrace it as part of your journey, knowing that your peers and mentors have often felt similarly out of their depth. Ultimately, we are all doing the best job we can, which is all, as Neil Gaiman says, we can hope for, and that is enough.