

# ‘This is a topic that resonates’



In the first of two *Newsli* articles on Imposter Syndrome and seeking further conversation on the topic, **Brett Best, Jill Henshaw** and **Jules Dickinson** outline their recent findings on its prevalence in the SLI profession

**‘Imposter Syndrome’ (IS) is a popular term** these days. Perhaps not quite yet reaching buzzword status, it is still increasingly present on social media, blog posts and in informal conversation. It is a phenomenon to which many people can relate.

In February 2021, we (Brett Best, Jill Henshaw and Jules Dickinson) shared what we thought would be a small survey to gauge if IS was prevalent within the interpreting and translation field. We suspected it might be as all three of us would confess to being ‘recovering’ imposters – something we each found difficult to believe about each other. Outside our own experience, we all have an interest in the topic. For Jules, IS often surfaces in discussions with supervisees and is also an element of her work on shame resilience. From previous research Brett undertook with Rachel Wilkins on horizontal violence, she suspected that IS might present after certain types of experiences with certain colleagues. Jill has spoken with many practitioners who have struggled with

IS, including her students, and was interested in passing on ways to overcome it. A search through the relevant literature revealed no empirical evidence published to date specific to the field of interpreting and translation research and so, after some initial discussions in October 2019, we thought we should gather some data.

You may have seen the survey we distributed in February 2021, and our report in *Newsli* on the initial findings in April that year. Our survey garnered a total of 339 responses, which surprised and overwhelmed us. The number of responses and the distressing experiences shared by participants show that this is clearly a topic that resonates in our field. We still have a lot of data to analyse in more detail, but this article outlines some of the key findings.

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You can read about our recommendations and suggested strategies for managing IS in October’s issue of *Newsli*.

When we created the survey, we spent a lot of time designing the questions. We wanted to know the types of coping strategies practitioners might use to mitigate their feelings of imposterism. We were interested in the internal and unspoken struggles of people who felt the concept resonated with them, and whether that changed over time. We were curious about the influence of routes to qualification on feelings of IS. We wanted to know if people’s experiences were broadly similar or differed depending on the individual. Most importantly, we wanted to find out if experiencing IS impacts on an individual’s practice and, therefore, potentially the service that they provide. Furthermore, does it influence retention in the field? These thoughts formed the bedrock of the questions we explored in our survey and we outline some of the results in the following sections.

### **You are not alone**

As stated, the review of the literature shows we know surprisingly little about whether interpreters, translators and other communication professionals experience IS. However, the most obvious, and perhaps most important, finding of the survey is that feelings of self-doubt and anxiety are very prevalent in our industry. So, if you experience these feelings – or if you ever have – the crucial

message is that you are not alone. The sheer number of responses is testament to this, with most people indicating they were experiencing, or had experienced, IS to some degree during their career. While we acknowledge that people who relate to the topic of inquiry are more likely to respond to a survey; the number of people who responded shows this is a phenomenon our field needs to take seriously.

### **What does Imposter Syndrome feel like?**

Practitioners were very clear that IS means ‘I am not good enough!’, with 33 people explicitly using this wording. This is interesting when we look at IS and how it relates to shame and perfectionism. Brené Brown (2010) describes perfectionism as a 20-ton shield that we carry around, in the (mistaken) belief that it will protect us from the painful feelings of shame, judgment and blame.

However, it is impossible to achieve perfection (see Gross, 2022, for some excellent points on this), especially given the nature of simultaneous interpreting, where a myriad of factors affect and influence our performance. Shame, perfectionism and IS are bedfellows – we consistently set the bar too high, to ideals we can never attain. We fail to achieve our self-imposed high standards, which then creates or adds to our sense of self-doubt and not being good enough – and then we are back to shame. Shame adds fuel to the fire of IS by preventing us from identifying our feelings and talking about

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them with others (Caraniche, 2022). This silence stops us discovering that other people feel the same way, contributing to the sense of being alone in our experience of the phenomenon.

Another theme was the feeling of ‘not belonging’. Young (2011:40) talks about being a ‘stranger in a strange land’, noting that a ‘sense of belonging can go a long way in fostering self-confidence’ and several survey respondents mentioned feeling as though they didn’t belong, particularly within their profession. Interpreters are often caught in between worlds and are frequently seen as outsiders. This can lead to never really having a sense of place and the authors wonder if this may contribute to the feeling of being an imposter. Workplace experiences such as not seeing yourself represented in the workforce, particularly in the higher echelons, can also reinforce a sense of imposter syndrome.

Self-doubt was mentioned by a number of respondents. Individuals said they didn’t feel as ‘fluent, polished or confident as others in the profession’, that they were uncomfortable accepting praise and they always questioned themselves and their abilities. It is difficult to tease out the differences between self-doubt and IS but, in the case of the latter, it tends to go beyond self-doubt because if we have it, we truly believe we cannot fulfill our professional role. Very few of us are likely to feel fraudulent in all aspects of our lives, which would be the case if IS was purely a lack of self-confidence.

People who experience IS can have all

the external hallmarks of success, such as good qualifications, the respect of their peers and an outward appearance of success and achievement. However, deep down, they will feel inadequate, inept and simply not good enough. For some, no matter how skilled, knowledgeable or expert they become, nothing will dislodge that sense of being fraudulent.

### **Qualification routes – a major factor**

From 339 responses to the survey question about qualification routes, only 28 people said it hadn’t impacted on their feelings of IS. There were a number of common themes. Both the NVQ and university routes were mentioned as factors contributing to a sense of IS. People who had undergone the NVQ route reported feeling less confident about their academic levels, while those who qualified through the university route mentioned insecurities relating to their practical language skills. Some respondents noted they had experienced disparaging attitudes from those who had qualified at university. One respondent described a ‘historical professional snobbery’ about the NVQ route offering an insufficient theoretical basis for interpreters. Interpreters who qualified via the ‘old routes’, eg, pre-university, pre-NVQ, described feeling ‘less than’ for not having gone through university training, despite working hard for their qualification and having to pass a challenging exam.

Survey respondents also referenced the ‘...harsh, self-critical nature of training courses’, describing being torn down and not put back together again. The lack of ‘nurturing for success’ was noted and respondents detailed the detrimental impact overly critical course tutors (deaf and hearing) had on their confidence. We will look in more detail at this aspect in our next *Newsli* article but, from initial analysis of the data, it does seem like there is



a need to change the way in which we train interpreters, as well as how we support them post qualification.

### **Staying in the comfort zone**

When asked to identify situations where feelings of IS may surface, ‘entering new domains’ and working ‘with certain people’ tied for first place. Both of these scenarios emerged when evaluating how these feelings may impact our work as interpreters.

Several respondents explicitly reported feelings of imposterism limiting their career development. Some examples of how this plays out include turning down work they know they are capable of doing and only accepting assignments which are squarely within their comfort zone, whether familiar domains or people with whom the interpreter knows they feel comfortable. As this respondent comments, IS ‘...puts me off going for more challenging bookings which would develop my skills. I tend to stick to my comfort zone’.

In terms of working with certain people, 18 participants mentioned only working with – or actively avoiding – certain deaf clients. More respondents (30) said they avoid working with specific interpreters or colleagues whom they do not know, 19 people expressed anxiety about co-working generally and three said that they avoid co-working altogether.

This is obviously significant to both our profession and to the services that we provide and raises several questions. Do we receive adequate training in co-working? Are we taught

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to appropriately reflect on our role as supportive colleagues, with a shared goal of facilitating communication? If some of us are shying away from growth, do we have sufficient numbers in the profession to consistently provide services in all domains? Do we have clear and scaffolded pathways into new domains so those who are interested in a particular area can identify how they enter that field and feel supported in doing so? With pay rates rarely reflecting advanced experience or expertise, what are the incentives for interpreters to venture outside of their comfort zones and upskill themselves so that they feel confident working in new domains?

### **Once an imposter, always an imposter?**

We wanted to know if individuals who had struggled with IS felt it had changed. Their responses fell into four main categories: Improved, Worsened, Unchanged and Fluctuated. Of those who said their IS had worsened, a variety of reasons were provided. However, there were some common themes:

- ▲ Move to remote working
- ▲ Co-working experiences
- ▲ Particular domains
- ▲ Career-break due to illness/starting a family
- ▲ Changes to qualification status
- ▲ Length of time in the profession post-qualification



Interestingly, many of those who said their IS had improved gave the same reasons, such as becoming qualified, gaining experience and positive co-working experiences. This shows that the same situations, experienced differently, have hugely different consequences for individuals.

The largest number of respondents noting a change in their IS said it had improved, which begs the question whether it was, in fact, IS. There is an important distinction to be made between being consciously incompetent when learning and already having all the required skills, knowledge and ability but still not believing you are good enough. A large proportion of respondents identified feelings of IS when situations, or people, are new or unfamiliar. This, therefore, is something we wish to explore further, so as to distinguish between individuals feeling uncomfortable in a new profession or domain while learning and those with a broad range and wealth of experience still feeling like an imposter.

There were reports of increased anxiety leading to negative self-talk, such as 'You can't do that' and 'They're only asking because you're last on their list'. Additionally, mentions of health, hormones, perimenopause and menopause also led us to wonder if fluctuations in the prevalence of IS, or its severity, might coincide with hormonal cycles and changes. Various responses mentioned being more 'sensitive to co-workers' feedback' on some

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days more than others. This could be a factor worthy of exploration, but we also need to consider the approach of the co-worker and the appropriateness of the feedback.

### Seeding fruitful conversations

This research has only scratched the surface of the phenomenon of Imposter Syndrome within the sign language interpreting and translation field. As you can see from the points raised in this article, it seems that it is an area that warrants further investigation and that needs acknowledging and addressing. We plan to create an ASLI forum thread on the topic to enable discussions and the sharing of useful information.

Hopefully this research will be a seed from which more fruitful conversations grow, helping us to speak openly about this issue and provide support to one another and collectively tackle this phenomenon as a profession. In the October edition of *Newsli*, we will look at strategies for addressing feelings of IS and discuss ways of coping when you experience it.

#### REFERENCES AND RESOURCES:

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