
Feeling Like a Fraud

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About the Author

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Abstract

Many people — especially women — experience feelings of fraudulence when singled out for praise, press, publicity, or promotion. While such feelings of fraudulence may be deplorable, especially if and when they trouble women more than men, these same feelings also may indicate a wise reluctance to believe in the accuracy of absolute ranking, and may point the way to a valid critique of hierarchical structures. Apology and self-disparagement may indicate an honest refusal to internalize the idea that having power or public exposure proves one's merit and/or authority. Apologetic or hedging speech may indicate uneasiness with rhetorical or coercive forms of speech and behavior, and may signal a desire to find more collaborative forms. People who feel in public like imposters are perhaps more to be trusted than those who have never experienced feelings of fraudulence. The analysis is placed in context of a theoretical model of a double and conflicting structure within the psyche and within the society: overvalued, overdeveloped, "vertical," competitive functions at odds with undervalued, under-recognized, "lateral," collaborative functions. A double vision of these double functions within both psyche and society is recommended to understand feelings of fraudulence and to overcome them in contexts where that is necessary.

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Not so long ago in Wisconsin at the Wingspread Center I attended a conference on women's leadership in higher education. Seventeen women in a row spoke from the floor during a plenary session and all seventeen started their remarks with some kind of apology or disclaimer. The self-deprecating comments ranged from "I just wanted to say . . ." to "I have just one point to make . . ." to "I never thought about this before, but . . ." through "I really don't know what I'm talking about, but here goes!"

Ironically enough, all of us had been funded to attend the conference because we supposedly knew something about Women's Leadership. Yet we seemed to share a feeling of illegitimacy when speaking in front of women like ourselves. The apologies started me on a new train of thought which led to this talk on "Feeling Like a Fraud."

I find that this title triggers a flash of recognition in both male and female friends and colleagues. For many, it calls up a familiar feeling — the feeling that in taking part in public life one has pulled the wool over others' eyes; that one is in the wrong place, and about to be found out; that there has been a colossal mistake in the selection and accreditation process which the rest of the world is about to discover. One dreams recurrently, as I do, that one has been exposed as "not belonging," or as having "gotten in" under false pretenses. In my case, someone from Harvard University calls to say they have found out I never took the Ph.D. qualifying exam in German. Or one feels like a play actor, a hypocrite, a stager of charades, or like sixteen personalities without a common center. One feels illegitimate in doing something, or appearing as something; one feels apologetic, undeserving, anxious, tenuous, out-of-place, misread, phony, uncomfortable, incompetent, dishonest, guilty. Many women and men I know seem to share these feelings. But some research and much observation suggests they are especially severe in women, both in chronic life-long forms and in acute forms in particular situations.

I think we need to take a double look at the phenomenon of feeling like a fraud. I will discuss it here from two apparently opposed points of view. I suggest *both* that we mustn't let the world make us feel like frauds, *and* that we must keep alive in ourselves that sense of fraudulence which sometimes overtakes us in public places. I suggest that on the one hand feeling like a fraud indicates that we have, deplorably, internalized value systems that said most people were incompetent and illegitimate in the spheres of power and public life and authority. But then on the other hand, I suggest that when we apologize in public, we are at some level making a deeply wise refusal to carry on the pretense of deserving and feeling good about roles in conventional and oppressive hierarchies. I think that most feelings of personal fraudulence need to be analyzed politically and deplored, especially feelings of fraudulence in lower caste people. But on the other hand, I also think that feeling like a fraud is conducive to social and political *change*, and that some forms of it should be applauded and developed in us, so that we become better at spotting fraudulence in, and trying to alter, the forms of our culture.

You may be wondering which of these sides I will come out on. I am coming out on both sides. My talk is like a Moebius strip. On one side it says, "We must not let them make us feel like frauds." And on the other side it says, "Let us continue to spot fraudulence in the roles we are asked to play." And when I twist over this strip which has two "opposing" sides and join it together again as a circle, I have the Moebius strip phenomenon. You run your finger along the surface. Without changing sides, you cover all surfaces of the twisted circle of tape. In the end your finger comes back to the very spot it began without having changed sides. I feel that the two kinds of argument I am making here are similarly, so to speak, both "on the same side."

Let me give some more specific examples of the feelings of fraudulence which I am talking about. In students it often takes these forms. "The Admissions Committee made a mistake. I don't belong here." Or "I got an A on this paper. *So he didn't find me out.*" Or "I got a B on this paper. *So he found me out.*" Or "I got a C on this paper. *He really found me out.*" All three reactions to the grade are variants on the same feeling that one was an imposter to begin with as author of the paper. Or in reaction to the comment: "You made your points beautifully in this paper," the student may think, "It can't be true. I can't even remember what I said." Or a student who works on a committee may be praised by the Dean for her organizational skill, and think guiltily of the mess on

the desk which the Dean hasn't seen. Analogously, a person feeling like a fraud when told that someone likes her will feel "Then, he must be a jerk." Or, if told she is beautiful, will think only of her faults. Likewise, a graduate student, told that she has written "the definitive work" and will very likely have a brilliant defense, is likely to think that it is all a colossal mistake, and that she couldn't "defend" a guppy. When a letter of recommendation states: "Ms. X is one of the brightest students I have taught in the last 15 years," Ms. X is likely to think, "What a pushover! But, how long can I keep fooling her?" When a commencement speaker says "Medicine will be better off with people like you entering the field," the graduates are likely to think, "These speakers are all hypocrites." If an executive says, "She has set her goals high and has met them in a truly professional way," the employee may feel, "This is no picture of me. I just hold the office together. I just talk to people, for goodness sake." The book reviewer may say, "This book is a path-breaking study," while the faculty member feels, "No, I just cobbled my term papers together into a book of essays because I want to get tenure." Within life in general, one may feel like a fraud speaking in meetings, calling in to a talk show, writing to the newspaper, being praised, telling people what one thinks, claiming to know anything, being called an expert, taking a strong point of view, putting one's head up in any public place, having opinions, and, most terrifying of all, having one's opinions taken seriously.

I have begun to touch on the tip of the iceberg for a few rather privileged people in rather academic and elite situations. There are myriad other examples from spheres of experience which are more widely shared in terms of class and race and culture. But I notice as I think through feelings of fraudulence that they seem to me not to occur in some areas of life. I pat our cat and the cat purrs. I don't feel like a fraud. It's not the same as getting an A on a paper. When I bring home chocolate chip mint ice cream, the kids' appreciation doesn't throw me into a panic about who I am. I think that being praised for a good spaghetti sauce or for finding a bargain is not so unnerving as being praised for giving a speech.

I do not think that it is simply the public nature of certain activities which makes us feel fraudulent. Kiyoo Morimoto of the Bureau of Study Council at Harvard/Radcliffe has said that a majority of the incoming freshmen feel that they were admitted to the college by mistake. Feeling fraudulent can infect lives even within not-very-public situations.