

What is Impostor Syndrome?

Katherine Hawley

Department of Philosophy, University of St Andrews, St Andrews, Fife KY16 9AL

kjh5@st-andrews.ac.uk

January 2019

Abstract

People are described as suffering from impostor syndrome when they feel that their external markers of success are unwarranted, and fear being revealed as a fraud. Impostor syndrome is commonly framed as a troubling individual pathology, to be overcome through self-help strategies or therapy. But in many situations an individual's impostor attitudes can be epistemically justified, even if they are factually mistaken: hostile social environments can create epistemic obstacles to self-knowledge. The concept of impostor syndrome prevalent in popular culture needs greater critical scrutiny, as does its source, the concept of impostor phenomenon which features in psychological research.

I

Introduction. People are described as suffering from impostor syndrome when they are successful by external measures such as exam results or professional accolades, but they feel that those external markers are unwarranted and that they therefore risk being revealed as an 'impostor'. Information about impostor syndrome very often features in well-meaning advice for women and minorities of all kinds in career and academic contexts. Learning about impostor syndrome – and its apparent prevalence – is presented as a first step towards overcoming it, and thereby getting closer to having it all, i.e. both professional success and personal happiness.

The concept of impostor syndrome was introduced by clinical psychologists Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes in their (1978), using the term 'Impostor Phenomenon'. To this day, 'phenomenon' rather than 'syndrome' dominates in psychological literature, and the condition is not recognised as a mental disorder in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. Clance and Imes observed a repeated pattern of impostor attitudes amongst the over 150 successful women they had worked with in therapy or in college classes. They noted consequent patterns of behaviour and patterns of anxiety and depression, they suggested connections with childhood experience, and they proposed therapeutic interventions. In 1985 Clance published a mass-market book – *The Impostor Phenomenon: Overcoming The Fear That Haunts Your Success*. Since then, both psychological research and, most notably, popular publications have flourished.¹

Impostor syndrome is important as a cultural phenomenon. It is striking how eagerly the concept and its self-help framing have been taken up, given the timing of various waves of feminism and corresponding backlashes. But that is a story for another day. Impostor syndrome is undeniably also important as a source of pain and anxiety for those who suffer

¹ Young (2011) is an excellent popular treatment, informed by research literature. Sakulku and Alexander (2011) reviews a wide range of psychological research, whilst Calvard (2018) provides an overview from an organisational studies perspective, including thoughtful suggestions about social factors beyond personality. Pauline Clance's website http://paulineroseclance.com/impostor_phenomenon.html offers an extensive bibliography on impostor syndrome, last updated in 2013. In general, it's necessary to search for both 'impostor' and 'imposter' as well as for both 'syndrome' and 'phenomenon'. 'Impostorism' is sometimes used to refer to less serious forms of impostor phenomenon. And 'impostor delusion' refers to Capgras syndrome, an unrelated condition.

from it, and as an obstacle to people's flourishing in their lives and careers. Impostor syndrome is often thought of as widespread amongst members of disadvantaged social groups; if this is accurate, then it is also important as a social justice matter.² Not everything which is important rewards philosophical investigation, but in this paper I hope to establish that impostor syndrome is a fruitful topic for philosophers to discuss. We have tools, concepts and distinctions which can help deepen understanding of impostor syndrome. This in turn can help us formulate critical questions about how impostor syndrome is addressed in both academic research and in broader discussions. (I think that impostor syndrome also provides an interesting testing ground for broader theories across epistemology, philosophy of mind, moral and political philosophy, but I will not try to make that case here.)

A key task is to specify more carefully what impostor syndrome is. I will try to explicate what seems to me to be the everyday concept of impostor syndrome, but later I will discuss the relationship between this and academic research. (There is no single agreed scientific definition, although there are widely-used diagnostic tools.) Clearly, impostor syndrome involves negative attitudes to one's own performance or skill – call these 'impostor attitudes'. Moreover, these impostor attitudes must be in some way mistaken. After all, someone who is genuinely an impostor, and knows this, is not suffering from impostor syndrome. I will first discuss the nature of impostor attitudes, then discuss the ways in which they can be mistaken.

II

Content of Impostor Attitudes So, what are impostor attitudes: beliefs, doubts, feelings, fears? And what are they about: performance, skill, achievement? Let's start with content. Some impostor attitudes are specific and past-directed, targeting a particular past performance or project. For example someone may think that the essay she has written is a poor piece of philosophy, that her acting performance last night was weak, or that her contributions to today's meeting were irrelevant. Other impostor attitudes are specific and future-directed, targeting performances and projects yet to come; impostor syndrome can thereby contribute to performance anxiety or nerves. Future-directed impostor attitudes are of course compatible with past-directed impostor attitudes: someone may think that her comments today were irrelevant, and that she'll do no better tomorrow. But they can come apart. A central pattern of impostor thinking runs as follows: I did a good job today, but that was just a matter of luck or frantic preparation, and I won't be so successful again tomorrow (Sakulku and Alexander 2011, p. 76). Such future-directed impostor attitudes are not based on doubts about the quality of past performance.

Attitudes of both these types target the quality of what is produced or done: is it any good? But a third type of impostor attitude targets underlying skill, competence, or talent. Someone may accept that she has managed to produce good work, and even that she will continue to do so, yet fail to attribute this to her own competence. Rather, she attributes her success to luck, to being in the right place at the right time, to support from others, to personal charm, or to sheer hard work.

In practice, the relationships between these three types of impostor attitudes are complex. Someone's belief that she lacks talent may explain why she refuses to infer from her past success to the prospect of future success: the past success must have been a fluke. And belief

² There is mixed evidence as to whether women are in general more prone to impostor syndrome than men (Craddock et al. 2011), (Kumar and Jagacinski 2006), (Badawy et al 2018). Working in a field which does not match the stereotype for your gender, race, social class, or other identity may be a significant factor (e.g. Lige et al (2017)). In any case, many non-specialist discussions are aimed primarily at women (e.g. Young 2011).

in one's own lack of talent may prompt doubt about past success. Conversely, of course, doubting one's concrete achievements makes it easy to doubt whether one has any talent. So most people who are prone to impostor thinking will have some combination of negative past-directed, future-directed, and competence-directed attitudes.

Still, it's useful to distinguish the three. It is far from obvious what relationship there is between a pattern of successful action and underlying talent, skill, competence, or know-how (Ericsson et al 2006; Hawley 2003; Stanley 2011). Even if there is no substantive difference between regular success and competence, an individual may nevertheless focus her concerns on one of these rather than the other. Moreover acknowledging the variety of impostor attitudes helps clarify possible causes and potential remedies for impostor syndrome. For example, challenging the ideology that successful actions are valuable only when they result from individual talent may help to undermine competence-directed impostor attitudes, or at least make them less distressing. Likewise, highlighting gendered conceptions of excellence, skill, and talent can also speak to these concerns (Leslie et al 2015; Woodfield 2015). But this may not help people who doubt whether they are even generating successful actions.

Here is another distinction: impostor attitudes can embody absolute or relative judgements. For example, someone who thinks her short story is unimaginative may be comparing it to what she takes to be some absolute standard of good stories, or she may be comparing the quality of her story to that of others' work. In competitive contexts, doing better than others is a necessary, perhaps even a sufficient condition, for doing well. But even in supposedly non-competitive contexts we often make comparisons, both for their own sake and as a means of working out what the absolute standards are. Different strategies may be useful for different sufferers from impostor syndrome, depending on whether they are focused on absolute or on relative standards. For example, someone who worries about meeting absolute standards may be helped to notice how imperfect everyone else is; someone who worries about meeting relative standards may be helped to focus more on succeeding in her own terms. But for simplicity's sake I mostly neglect relative judgements in this paper.

Negative attitudes towards one's own competence and success lie at the heart of impostor syndrome. These core attitudes are very often accompanied by the anticipation of being 'found out'. Anxious anticipation may focus on the personal, practical consequences of being found out: perhaps getting fired from one's job, being excluded from social circles, or sheer embarrassment. Practical consequences may also include letting others down: a self-doubting doctor may worry about harming her patients, and any of us may worry about disappointing those who have made sacrifices to help us succeed.

But fear of being found out is also fear of a kind of moral humiliation. It is easy to overlook the moralised language of impostor syndrome. Terms such as 'fraud', 'found out', 'unmasked', and of course 'impostor' normally signify intentional deceit. Someone who fears being unmasked as a fraud does not merely fear others knowing about her inadequacy: she blames herself for having pretended to be capable in the first place. In her view, not only is she inadequate, she is ethically culpable for concealing this inadequacy. I do not suggest that this ethical judgement is fully explicit, but it lurks in the language and ideas associated with impostor syndrome.

III

Nature of Impostor Attitudes. I have explored a variety of contents for impostor attitudes: they may be about successful performance (past or future) or underlying competence, about

relative or absolute standards of achievement or competence, and about the prospect of being harmed or shamed through unmasking. In what follows, I will often use ‘inadequate’ as a short-hand for the negative content of such attitudes to one’s own performance or competence. This has the advantage of capturing a wide variety of negative attitudes. The disadvantage is that adequacy may seem a very low bar: surely impostor syndrome cannot be ‘cured’ merely by coming to accept that one is adequate? But with that noted, I turn now to discuss what sort of attitudes are central to impostor syndrome, and in particular whether we can take belief as central.

Certainly the starkest form of impostor attitude is outright belief in one’s own inadequacy. But many of those who self-identify as suffering from impostor syndrome speak of doubt, worry, and lack of confidence, rather than outright belief, whilst diagnostic questionnaires such as the Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale use similar terminology (Clance 1985); I discuss Clance’s diagnostic scale in section IX. Indeed, we might speculate that people who outright believe that they are inadequate in some sphere of activity are likely to have simply given up and directed their energies elsewhere, becoming unavailable for studies of impostor phenomenon in their original field. This is one significant way in which impostor syndrome can damage lives, but we also need conceptual space for impostor syndrome understood in terms of mere doubt. So let’s understand impostor attitudes as involving lack of belief in one’s own adequacy, which may or may not include outright belief in one’s own inadequacy.

This doxastic characterisation of impostor attitudes does not capture the affective elements of impostor syndrome. Popular treatments and academic research alike refer to anxiety, fear, a ‘sense’ of being a fraud, ‘perception’ of incompetence, or ‘feelings’ of inadequacy. We could pause for a definitional dispute over whether it is in principle possible to have impostor syndrome without feeling bad about it. After all, the bad consequences of impostor syndrome do not turn solely upon its causing suffering: if people from certain social groups regularly underestimate their capabilities, and consequently turn away from demanding, rewarding activities, then this is bad for all of us, even if the people involved don’t find it distressing. Nevertheless, impostor syndrome typically seems to involve affective attitudes in addition to its characteristic doxastic states.

Is it possible to suffer from impostor syndrome *without* the characteristic doxastic states, i.e. whilst believing that one is skilful and successful? Perhaps. This type of impostor syndrome would be like some instances of phobias. It is possible for someone with a spider phobia to believe, indeed to know that UK spiders are perfectly safe, whilst nevertheless feeling extreme fear at the prospect of encountering one. By analogy, perhaps there could be a sufferer from impostor syndrome who believes that she is skilful and successful, yet still has high levels of anxiety, of a type more appropriate to someone who lacks such beliefs.

Despite these complications, in the remainder of this paper I will primarily focus on lack of belief in one’s own adequacy as the central impostor attitude, though I will revisit this decision in the final section. This will facilitate my discussions of epistemic justification for impostor attitudes. Of course, issues of justification can also arise for affective attitudes, but I lack space to deal with such issues properly here. Understanding and assessing the doxastic attitudes which are central to most cases of impostor syndrome is a worthwhile task in its own right, even though it will not give us a fully-rounded picture.

From Impostor Attitudes to Impostor Syndrome. Impostor syndrome involves impostor attitudes, but not everyone who holds impostor attitudes has impostor syndrome. Two further factors are important. The first is quantity: it is entirely normal to have impostor attitudes from time to time, indeed this seems like a healthy check on self-aggrandisement or complacency. Someone who never doubts their own capacities is either wildly arrogant, or else severely under-using their talents. It is only when impostor attitudes are frequent and persistent that we may be in the territory of impostor syndrome. And ‘frequent and persistent’ is domain-relative: someone might suffer impostor syndrome at work, yet feel confident in their creative hobby.

The other key factor is error. Imagine someone who is terrible at her job, has plenty of evidence that she is terrible at her job, and on that evidence believes that she is terrible at her job. This person does not have impostor syndrome, though she has other problems. For impostor attitudes to add up to impostor syndrome, they must be in some way misplaced, mistaken, or inappropriate.

Discussions of impostor syndrome often seem to blur issues of truth with issues of justification. Suppose that someone outright believes that she is inadequate. It would be a mistake to believe this if it were false. But it would be a different type of mistake to hold this belief on the basis of insufficient evidence, when the person is not justified in believing that she is inadequate. (I will run roughshod over distinctions between believing without sufficient evidence and having an unjustified belief, but only for reasons of space: impostor attitudes provide an interesting test case for debates around evidentialism.)

This distinction between false belief and unjustified belief is of course familiar to philosophers. We can draw a corresponding distinction regarding lack of belief – such as lack of belief in one’s own competence – although it is harder to spell out neatly. One type of mistake is lacking belief in what is in fact true. Is lacking belief in some truth always a mistake? Not all true beliefs are worth having, even in the sense in which false beliefs are always worth avoiding. But a true belief about one’s own adequacy in an important domain seems to be a true belief which is well worth having, both for its own sake and insofar as it relieves anxiety and enables confident action.

A different type of mistake is lacking a belief which, if one had it, would be justified. Again, there are complications. First, a counterfactual is not the ideal way of spelling out this thought. Second, perhaps the fact that a belief would be justified does not automatically mean that lacking that belief is in any sense a mistake; some views of justification allow that each of belief and suspension is justified in certain epistemic situations (White 2005). Nevertheless, there are plenty of ordinary situations in which people are epistemically criticisable for failing to believe what they have evidence for. Typical descriptions of people with impostor syndrome seem to assign them to that category: the person’s beliefs are not appropriately responsive to the situation as it presents itself to her.³

Errors of truth and errors of justification can occur in various permutations. Beliefs can be true but unjustified, false but justified, or both false and unjustified; similarly for lack of belief. It is normally taken for granted that people who have impostor syndrome are in fact skilled and successful, so that their impostor attitudes embody an error of truth, a factual

³ Matthew Soteriou (2013, chapter 15) has a much more nuanced account of suspension of judgement, and the conditions under which this is justified. This would certainly repay proper attention in the context of impostor syndrome; I thank Paul Faulkner for drawing Soteriou’s account to my attention.

mistake. This assumption goes back to Clance and Imes (1978), who worked with college students and high-flying professionals, and it continues to guide both research and informal advice today. This makes sense. People who are genuinely inadequate for their roles don't need consciousness-raising about impostor syndrome. They need support which is primarily focused not on their doxastic states or confidence, but on providing training, assistance, or better-suited opportunities. Thus in practical terms it makes sense not to classify such people as suffering from impostor syndrome.

Of course a sufferer from severe impostor syndrome believes that she is in exactly this situation. She thinks: 'those other people may be suffering from impostor syndrome, but I am genuinely an impostor!' Thus one obstacle to 'curing' impostor syndrome through consciousness-raising and self-help is that a person must acknowledge that she is after all capable and successful, if she is to acknowledge that she suffers from impostor syndrome. (This looks like an instance of Moore's paradox: I am talented and successful, but I don't believe that I am talented and successful...)

Another complication here is that severe impostor syndrome may in fact reduce someone's competence and success, by undermining her confidence and her ability to maintain the skills and knowledge she needs. Via that mechanism, impostor attitudes may start off as factually mistaken, but render themselves correct, as a form of self-fulfilling prophecy.⁴ Given the standard assumption that impostor syndrome involves persistent impostor attitudes which are factually mistaken, a person in this sad situation does not have impostor syndrome any more, since she has become a genuine impostor.

Despite this oddity, I will stick with the standard assumption. A further common assumption seems to be that impostor syndrome involves a mistake in respect of justification as well as truth: it involves impostor attitudes which are not well-supported by evidence. Impostor syndrome is often characterised as an inability or unwillingness to 'internalise' what seems to observers to be clear objective evidence of talent and success. By assumption, we are talking about people who have gained high grades, been admitted to selective universities, progressed within competitive professional careers, or received accolades for their creative work. And of course they know these concrete facts. So how could they possibly be justified in doubting themselves?

Some are indeed unjustified in their doubt: if they brought their beliefs into line with their evidence, they would recover from impostor syndrome. But we should also be open to the possibility that many talented people who have impostor attitudes are justified in having those impostor attitudes. This may be because they lack easy access to sufficient evidence of their own success and competence, or because they have misleading evidence which suggests that they are inadequate. Impostor attitudes may be perfectly justified in some evidential situations, even though they are factually incorrect. In the next section I review some concrete ways in which such a situation can arise. I will then discuss whether we should count people who have justified but false impostor attitudes as suffering from impostor syndrome.

V

⁴ Boudewijn de Bruin (2014) discusses a similar mechanism via which testimonial injustice may become self-vindicating, as its 'victim' becomes genuinely less valuable as a testifier.

When Impostor Attitudes are False but Justified. How could it be that someone is talented, and has turned her talent into externally recognised success, yet reasonably doubts herself? Whether or not we are prone to impostor attitudes, our evidence in respect of our own talent, success and achievements goes significantly beyond the formal markers of grades, job offers, promotions or prizes. We make direct judgements about the quality of our work, just as we do with other people's work. We pick up on subtle feedback from others, both verbal and nonverbal, both intentional and nonintentional. We have evidence about how straightforward or effortful we find tasks, and we compare this to what others seem to manage. Moreover it is common knowledge that it's possible to be over-promoted at work (Peter and Hull 1969), that award-winning books do not always stand the test of time (Flavin 1944), that prodigies do not always succeed in later life, and that we do not reveal our true selves in job interviews.

None of us is justified in forming firm beliefs about our own capabilities on the basis of formal markers alone; these need to be bolstered by ongoing and wider evidence. Some of us are fortunate enough to build up a fairly coherent collection of positive evidence in favour of the belief that we are capable and successful, mixed with relatively little evidence against this. But the complexity of the picture leaves scope for a number of ways in which someone's impostor attitudes may be factually mistaken yet justified even in the face of what she knows to be some key external markers of success.

My examples mainly focus on academic life, including the student experience, partly because that is personally familiar to most readers of this article, but also because it has been a central focus for empirical research.

VI

Different Responses to the Same Quality of Work. Many studies have illustrated that feedback on job performance is not determined wholly by merit: factors such as gender, race, and physical appearance also play a role. For example, student evaluations of online teachers were more positive when the teachers were given a male name rather than a female name (MacNell, Driscoll and Hunt 2012). Enquiries to professors about potential doctoral study received more positive responses when apparently written by white men as opposed to men of minority background or women (Milkman, Akinola and Chough 2015). Male biology students rated other males as more knowledgeable than females, even when in fact the female students were performing better on class assessments (Grunspan et al 2016). And So On.⁵ Women and minorities face systematically less positive feedback on their performance, explicitly and implicitly, even when they achieve well in terms of formal markers such as grades. Such evidence provides a rebutting defeater for the evidence of capability which is provided by formal markers.

Moreover as institutions have begun to make statements and adopt policies intended to reduce systematic disadvantages, this has created opportunities for resentful whispers – or outspoken accusations – that women and minorities who achieve professional success have done so only because of affirmative action, or a more informal unfair boost. Perhaps this is the modern-day replacement for telling women that they have slept their way to the top, or traded on their feminine charms; perhaps this is an addition rather than a replacement. It is unusual to be able to ignore this kind of talk completely, and so it goes into the evidential mix when we try to assess our capabilities (Gheaus 2015). Such comments provide an

⁵ Two very useful bibliographic resources are (Williams, Phillips, and Hall 2014), and <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2016/03/08/gender-bias-in-academe-an-annotated-bibliography/>

undercutting defeater. For example, they can break the evidential link between being admitted to a prestigious graduate programme and being highly capable, by proposing an alternative explanation for the admissions decision.

Both rebutting and undercutting defeaters of these kinds can be mostly invisible to third-party observers, no matter how well-meaning those observers may be. This helps explain why, from this outside perspective, impostor attitudes can seem so irrational. The formal markers of success are available for all to see, whilst the informal evidence against the person's being talented and successful is harder to detect from the third-party perspective. The structure of this situation creates an interesting case for standpoint epistemologists: the disadvantaged person knows more about her situation, about what's said to her and how she is treated, yet what she knows makes it more difficult for her to know the truth about her own capabilities and achievements.

VII

'People like me don't do well at this sort of thing.' Although the research evidence about the prevalence of impostor phenomenon is mixed, the popular perception of impostor syndrome is that it is correlated with being a minority in your field, due to race, gender, social class, or other category; informal advice is typically given with that perception in mind. A person who is a minority in her field can be justified in thinking that she is less capable of succeeding than are others around her, via the thought that people like her don't do well at this sort of thing. This does not represent a single phenomenon, but rather a family of different tricky situations.

The 'people like me...' thought needn't trade on internalised racism or sexism, for example a worry that women are somehow just naturally bad engineers. Instead, it can be based on observations or inferences about the structural factors or individual prejudices which make it difficult for someone of that type to succeed in this field. A black student in a overwhelmingly white field might have an accurate view of her own high intelligence and capabilities, combined with a justified concern that these qualities will not be enough to ensure her continuing success: she needs to be better than everyone else in order to succeed.⁶ To take a different sort of example, a student who attended a struggling high school may be justified in worrying that this has not prepared her to flourish at university.

It is not obvious how best to fit such cases into the framework of impostor syndrome. After all, some people in these situations will have impostor attitudes that are entirely accurate: someone knows that she will never be 'good enough', either because she is subjected to unfairly high standards, or because she is insufficiently prepared. I am inclined to stand by my earlier claim that where the person's gloomy belief is accurate, this should not be classified as an instance of impostor syndrome, though the situation is of course damaging and unfair. She may nevertheless be treated – mistakenly – as suffering from impostor syndrome, if the unfairly high standards or difficult background are not easily visible to observers.

Other people in such situations will have impostor attitudes that are perfectly well justified, yet factually mistaken. Many people who struggle with social disadvantage do indeed fail, but some have the luck, talent, and determination which enable them to succeed alongside

⁶ Thomas and Hollenshead (2001) found that at a major research university, 77% of women of color agreed 'I have to work very hard to be perceived as a legitimate scholar', as compared to white women and men of color (both 58%) or white men (46%).

classmates who have much less to overcome. Those who do eventually succeed have therefore passed through a phase of having justified, inaccurate impostor attitudes.

Stereotype threat might also seem relevant here (Steele and Aronson 1995; Saul 2016). When someone is affected by stereotype threat, this reduces the quality of her performance. This makes certain impostor attitudes true – now she really is performing badly. But in addition stereotype threat can make it more difficult to judge a person’s underlying capability by her performance under stressful conditions, i.e. the conditions under which stereotype threat seems most powerful. Again, this illustrates both the usefulness of distinguishing between impostor attitudes which target performance and those which target underlying capability, and also the difficulties of untangling these issues without reference to research on skill, know-how, and performance.

VIII

Understanding Feedback. When we look beyond formal markers of our success, we are heavily reliant on interpreting the informal feedback we are given: this is certainly the case in academic contexts. People who are not comfortably at home in a cultural setting may have more trouble understanding the subtleties of what is being said. As teachers, most of us have encountered well-intentioned students who seem to have difficulty grasping the feedback we are trying to give them, whether positive or negative. For example, suppose that a graduate student gets neither harsh critique nor positive affirmation from her supervisor. Is the absence of harsh critique supposed to convey that she is doing well (‘if there was a problem, I’d let you know’)? Or is the absence of positive affirmation supposed to convey that there is a problem (‘I can’t find anything nice to say’)?⁷

Such difficulties may lead someone to think they are being criticised when in fact they are being praised; this is another way in which impostor attitudes may gain justification. Moreover the reflective student who is aware of her difficulties in interpreting feedback may reasonably become less confident in her judgement, feeling that she simply doesn’t know how well or badly she is doing. Anyone can have such difficulties in communicating with another individual, especially where there is a power imbalance as in the teacher-student relationship. But the difficulties seem more likely to occur where there is a cultural gap between the person giving feedback and the person receiving it, whether that gap is a matter of social class, national culture, or racial identity.

Sufferers from impostor syndrome are sometimes described as discounting positive feedback, because they think it is driven by pity, kindness, or inattention, rather than by a genuine recognition of quality; this can be a frustrating experience for the person trying to give positive feedback. But, ironically, talking about one’s struggles with impostor syndrome can make it more reasonable to suppose that well-meaning people are treating you with kid gloves, offering positive feedback which is exaggerated or unmerited. After all, they know how much your confidence needs boosting. Again, such thoughts look like undercutting defeaters, breaking the evidential link between praise and quality.

So far I have itemised some reasons why people who have inaccurate impostor attitudes may nevertheless be justified in holding those attitudes, given the evidence available to them and the challenges they may face in interpreting that evidence. These reasons are not exhaustive,

⁷ <https://kieranhealy.org/blog/archives/2013/08/16/academic-feedback/> makes vivid the different conventions of praise and criticism embedded in UK and US academia.

and nor are they mutually exclusive. Indeed, interestingly horrible intersectional effects may be generated by the epistemic challenges which arise from different social identities. I now move on to a philosophically more contentious suggestion as to why some impostor attitudes may be justified even when false.

IX

Varying Standards for Belief. I have already touched upon the idea that people from disadvantaged groups may need to be objectively more capable in order to achieve the same career success as others. A different thought is that two people may be answerable to the very same standard of practical success or competence, yet be subject to different epistemic standards for reasonable belief in their respective success or competence. This would be an example of pragmatic encroachment (for a recent review, see Kim 2017).

Suppose that you and I are classmates preparing for the same final exam, which will be marked anonymously to the same standard. Suppose you are a first-generation college student, and have struggled with health problems. Passing this exam represents your last chance to get your degree, join the middle classes, and avoid a lifetime of poorly-paid work. I, in contrast, can easily take a different module if I fail this one, and even if I don't get my degree I'll have a comfortable life, financially supported by my parents. Then perhaps you need overwhelming evidence that you will pass the exam in order for you to be reasonable in believing this, whereas I can reasonably believe I will pass the exam if I have a lesser quantity of evidence.

We can understand this situation as exemplifying pragmatic encroachment onto the epistemic standards for justified belief, making your impostor attitudes justified even though others would be unjustified in having the same attitudes towards themselves on the same evidential basis. But the idea of pragmatic encroachment is controversial. An alternative would be to insist that each of us is equally justified in believing that she will pass the exam, given our similar evidence, but that it makes sense for you to be more anxious about this, or to put in superhuman efforts to pass the exam with a big safety margin.

Earlier, I made the simplifying decision to focus on doxastic impostor attitudes, understood primarily as attitudes towards one's own success or competence rather than beliefs about the risk of unmasking. But if we put emotions back into the picture, we can try to assess them along some scale of rationality. It may be reasonable for you to fear failure more than I do, if you have no insurance. By analogy, someone who is allergic to bee-stings, and someone who merely finds them uncomfortable, have the same likelihood of being stung. But it makes sense for the allergic person to make greater efforts to avoid this, and to feel more agitated about the possibility of being stung.

X

Is this Really Impostor Syndrome? Many informal discussions of impostor syndrome seem to presuppose that where impostor attitudes are factually mistaken, they are also unjustified: the problem lies with the individual who has failed to 'internalise' evidence of her capabilities, or else failed to properly base her belief on this evidence. But I have reviewed a number of different situations in which someone who is genuinely talented and successful may not have strong overall evidential support for believing this about herself, despite having what looks to observers like straightforward formal markers of success.

That leaves us with a definitional question: should we allow that someone who has justified (though false) impostor attitudes is suffering from impostor syndrome, or should we reserve that label only for those whose impostor attitudes are not justified? I will briefly discuss the relationship between the ordinary concept and the scientific literature below, but here I focus on the concept as it is used in everyday contexts. It seems to me that the ordinary concept does not positively exclude people who have justified but false impostor attitudes. Rather, the (mistaken) assumption is that this would be a very unusual situation, and therefore at best a marginal form of impostor syndrome.

If I am right that justified but inaccurate impostor attitudes may be relatively widespread, we face a choice about which concept of impostor syndrome to use: a narrow one which includes only those people whose inaccurate impostor attitudes are unjustified, or a broad one which includes everyone with persistent inaccurate impostor attitudes, whether justified or unjustified. The choice is between being able to say ‘many people are falsely regarded as suffering from impostor syndrome when really they face epistemic obstacles in their social environment’ (narrow concept), and being able to say ‘many people who have impostor syndrome do so because they face epistemic obstacles in their social environment’ (broad concept).

This kind of situation lends itself to what Haslanger (2012) calls ‘ameliorative inquiry’: we can try to work out what concept best suits our normative goals. ‘Our’ needs unpacking, but I will simply assume a shared goal of minimising the prevalence of factually-inaccurate impostor attitudes, i.e. improving people’s grasp of their own capability and success. (‘Minimise’ not ‘eradicate’, so as to avoid sparking a compensatory epidemic of over-confidence or Dunning-Kruger syndrome.)

There are other important goals in this vicinity. For example we might also aim to improve everyone’s grasp of one another’s capability and success, and indeed aim to help everyone become more capable and successful. Moreover, we might aim to minimise the distress caused by impostor attitudes, even prioritising this goal if we think that’s easier than changing the attitudes themselves. But minimising the prevalence of factually-inaccurate impostor attitudes is my focus here. (Again, ‘we’ and ‘everyone’ need unpacking: what if different groups of people need different concepts in order to reduce their own inaccurate impostor attitudes, and/or to help other people?.)

How can a mere concept help achieve this goal? Self-help advice seem to assume that sufferers will benefit from acquiring the concept of impostor syndrome and recognising its application to them, thus overcoming a hermeneutical obstacle to understanding their own experience.⁸ In our ameliorative inquiry, we should consider which concept will be helpful for sufferers to use. But non-sufferers also need to think about impostor syndrome: it should not be treated as an issue only for those who suffer. This is partly because of our general responsibility to be concerned for those around us, and partly because some of us hold specific managerial, coaching, mentoring, or indeed parental responsibilities. It is also because, as I showed above, inaccurate impostor attitudes can easily be generated by working in a hostile social environment: sufferers cannot change this single-handedly.

⁸ Maitra (2018) investigates the risks of this sort of gap-filling. Perhaps the concept of impostor syndrome too readily assimilates subjects’ experiences to low self-esteem or lack of confidence, directing attention away from the environmental justifications for their attitudes.

It's a complex empirical question whether the broad or the narrow concept of impostor syndrome will in fact be more useful in minimising the prevalence of inaccurate impostor attitudes (Hawley 2018), but I will indulge in some speculation here.

In favour of the broad concept: from a first-person standpoint it is hard to recognise which of one's own attitudes are unjustified, and hesitating over this for impostor attitudes seems to create an extra burden for the subject. As I noted above, it is difficult for an observer to know what evidence the subject has – for example, what sly undermining she has received – and thus to judge whether her impostor attitudes are justified or not. Moreover in practice very many people with inaccurate impostor attitudes will lie somewhere on a scale between 'mostly justified' and 'mostly unjustified', rather than at either pole. Finally, the bad personal and social consequences of impostor syndrome flow primarily from the factual inaccuracy of the attitudes, rather than their justificatory status.

In favour of the narrow concept: it may seem that justified and unjustified impostor attitudes have quite different causes, and thus need quite different remedies. Remedies for justified impostor beliefs will require us to address structural inequalities and other social environmental problems, as I demonstrated above. That is, we need to change and improve the evidence which is available to people, rather than changing how they handle their evidence. In contrast, we might think that unjustified impostor beliefs reflect a kind of epistemic pathology on the part of the sufferer, which should be remedied by addressing the subject's internal psychological state rather than trying to improve her environment. But it would be a mistake to align 'justified' versus 'unjustified' with 'environmental' versus 'psychological' causes and remedies.

Imagine a person who is unable to internalise evidence of her own talent and success, to convert this into the confident self-belief which her evidence amply justifies. What could explain this? Both scientific studies and popular discussions reference personality traits (such as perfectionism), and expectations and attitudes developed in childhood, alongside present-day social factors such as minority status in one's field. I have already suggested a number of ways in which a difficult social environment can affect the evidence available to a person. But presumably it can also causally influence the way in which a person handles her evidence, and forms beliefs on that basis. For example, Lige, Peteet and Brown (2017) explore how African American college students with high 'private regard', i.e. positive views about their racial identity, seem less prone to impostor attitudes which are otherwise generated by their experiences at predominantly white institutions. It seems pointless to try to categorise explanatory stories such as this as either 'internal' or 'environmental', since the factors cannot be so neatly divided.

Overall, then, I am inclined to favour a broad concept of 'impostor syndrome', such that people can be epistemically justified in the impostor attitudes which make up their impostor syndrome, despite being in fact genuinely capable and successful. But whether this is the best choice for the purposes of minimising inaccurate impostor attitudes is ultimately an empirical matter which cannot be settled here.

XI

Diagnostic Criteria for Impostor Phenomenon. Isn't it rather presumptuous to think that philosophers can even begin to debate which concept of impostor syndrome should be adopted? Shouldn't this discussion already be much more closely tied to the details of the

extensive empirical literature on impostor phenomenon? Am I really qualified to write this paper?

It is one thing to read and digest empirical studies, quite another to assess them critically, and to understand the variety of their theoretical and methodological allegiances. But so far as I can tell research outside of philosophy does not straightforwardly resolve the issues I have raised in this paper. In this final section, I briefly compare some aspects of the psychological literature with my own treatment of the issues.

In studies, a subject's degree of impostor phenomenon is standardly measured using the Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (CIPS), via responses to a twenty-item quiz.⁹ Subjects consider statements including

'I have often succeeded on a test or task even though I was afraid that I would not do well before I undertook the task',

'I can give the impression that I'm more competent than I really am', and

'Sometimes I feel or believe that my success in my life or in my job has been the result of some kind of error',

responding 'not at all true', 'rarely', 'sometimes', 'often', or 'very true'.¹⁰ Scoring the answers and assigning subjects to a place on a scale enables researchers to investigate whether high impostor phenomenon is associated with certain personality traits, childhood experiences, or attitudes to achievement. For example, how does impostor phenomenon relate to the 'fixed mindset' identified by Carol Dweck (Dweck 2006, Langford and Clance 1993)? It is also the basis for investigating whether impostor phenomenon is associated more with women than with men, or with certain kinds of minority status, or with experience of organisational change, for example. Researchers are often concerned with connections between impostor phenomenon and depression or anxiety, and with broader issues of self-esteem.

This framework is not well-suited for addressing differences between justified and unjustified impostor attitudes. Subjects are typically selected from a pool of people with some objective markers of success, e.g. college students or professionals, but we do not know what evidence is available to them beyond these formal markers, and the scale relies on self-report. Subjects are not asked to evaluate whether they are worrying *unnecessarily*, or are *over-anxious*, for example, though they are asked to compare their prior concerns with their perception of the actual outcome. The scale is primarily aimed at establishing what subjects think and feel, rather than the epistemic status of these attitudes.

Moreover, though it is harder for me to be certain on this point, the framework does not seem to mark a distinction between doxastic and affective attitudes. Subjects are asked whether they 'feel or believe' their success is due to error, whether they 'sometimes think' their success is due to luck, or 'feel' that this is the case, and the words 'afraid that', 'worry', 'dread', 'feel bad', and 'doubt that' are all used. This may not be a problem for the purposes for which the scale is normally used, but it makes it a blunt instrument for my purposes.

⁹ Clance sets out the CIPS in her (1985), and it is reproduced at her website

<http://paulineroseclance.com/pdf/IPTestandscoreing.pdf>

Alternatives include the Harvey Impostor Phenomenon Scale (Harvey 1981), but the differences between the various scales do not seem relevant for the issues I focus on in this paper.

¹⁰ I find myself uncertain how to distinguish between 'sometimes' and 'very true' in response to a 'Sometimes...' prompt; at least half the prompts are framed using 'often', 'rarely', 'sometimes' or 'at times'.

Reviewing the Clance Scale does highlight some important elements I have skated over in my discussions, most notably the fear or expectation of being ‘unmasked’; I have primarily focused on impostor attitudes which target the subject’s performance or capability, treating the fear of unmasking as secondary. I don’t think that this undermines my discussion, but it does show that there is more work to be done. In particular, we should investigate whether there is a useful concept of impostor syndrome which does not centrally involve fear of unmasking. After all, one might anticipate that fear of unmasking reduces with time, as the years pass and the unmasking never occurs. But this might not be accompanied by greater self-belief, or the abandonment of impostor attitudes: a subject may instead conclude that she is excellent at hiding her inadequacy.

Finally, it is genuinely unclear how far the social, political, and epistemic challenge of minimising inaccurate impostor attitudes can be closely guided by the psychological literature as it currently stands. The concept of impostor syndrome has a cultural profile which goes way beyond its psychotherapeutic origins. It is not obvious that this informal usage is in error, and should defer to the scientific meaning: the case seems unlike the mistaken usage of clinical terms such as ‘OCD’ or ‘depression’ to refer to ordinary tidiness or low mood. Thus there is rich potential for philosophical investigation of impostor syndrome and impostor attitudes, in ways which should be guided by – but not overly deferential to – existing psychological research.

Acknowledgements

I have given talks about impostor syndrome at the LMU Summer School in Mathematical Philosophy for Female Students, the University of St Andrews Philosophy Society, the St Andrews reflectorium, the University of Edinburgh Philosophy Society, the 2018 Philosophy in Progress conference at the University of Nottingham, the 2018 APA Pacific Division meeting, and the inaugural Social Epistemology Network meeting at the University of Oslo. In this way I learned through discussion with dozens of people, to whom I am very grateful; I have also learned a lot from mentoring conversations. I particularly thank Natalia Waights Hickman for her detailed and incisive commentary at the Oslo meeting, Guy Longworth for his useful comments on a draft, and Sarah Paul for writing such an exciting companion article.

References

- Badawy, Rebecca L., Brooke A. Gazdag, Jeffrey R. Bentley, and Robyn L. Brouer 2018: ‘Are All Impostors Created Equal? Exploring Gender Differences in the Impostor Phenomenon-Performance Link’. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 131, pp. 156-163.
- Calvard, Thomas 2018: ‘Impostor Syndrome as a Way of Understanding Gender and Careers’. In Adelina B. Broadbridge, and Sandra L. Fielden (eds.) *Research Handbook of Diversity and Careers*. Edward Elgar Publishing, pp. 211-22.
- Chrisman, Sabine M., W.A. Pieper, Pauline R. Clance, C.L. Holland and Cheryl Glickauf-Hughes 1995: ‘Validation of the Clance Imposter Phenomenon Scale’. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 65(3), pp. 456-467.
- Clance, Pauline 1985: *The Impostor Phenomenon: Overcoming the Fear that Haunts Your Success*. Peachtree Publishers.
- Clance, Pauline and Suzanne Imes 1978: ‘The Impostor Phenomenon in High-Achieving Women: Dynamics and Therapeutic Intervention’. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*, 15(3), pp. 241-247.

- Craddock, Sarah, Matt Birnbaum, Katrina Rodriguez, Christopher Cobb & Steven Zeeh 2011: 'Doctoral Students and the Impostor Phenomenon: Am I Smart Enough to Be Here?' *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 48(4), pp. 429-442,
- De Bruin, Boudewijn 2014: 'Self-Fulfilling Epistemic Injustice'. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2588430> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2588430>
- Dweck, Carol 2006: *Mindset: Changing the Way You Think to Fulfil Your Potential*. Random House.
- Ericsson, K. Anders, Neil Charness, Paul J. Feltovich, and Robert R. Hoffman (eds.) (2006): *The Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance*. Cambridge University Press.
- Flavin, Michael 1943: *Journey in the Dark*. Harper and Brothers.
- Fricker, Miranda 2007: *Epistemic Injustice*. Oxford University Press.
- Gheaus, Anca 2015: 'Three Cheers for the Token Woman'. *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 32(2), pp. 163-76.
- Grunspan, Daniel Z., Sarah L. Eddy, Sara E. Brownell, Benjamin L. Wiggins, Alison J. Crowe, and Steven M. Goodreau 2016: 'Males Under-Estimate Academic Performance of Their Female Peers in Undergraduate Biology Classrooms'. *PloS ONE* 11(2), e0148405.
- Harvey J. C. 1981. *The impostor phenomenon and achievement: A failure to internalize success*. Doctoral dissertation, Temple University, 1981. Dissertation Abstracts International, 42, 4969B.
- Haslanger, Sally 2012: *Resisting Reality*. Oxford University Press.
- Hawley, Katherine 2003: 'Success and Knowledge-How'. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 40(1), pp. 19-31.
- Hawley, Katherine 2018: 'Social Science as a Guide to Social Metaphysics?' *Journal for General Philosophy of Science*, 49(2), pp. 187-198.
- Kim, Brian 2017: 'Pragmatic Encroachment in Epistemology'. *Philosophy Compass*, 12(5), e12415.
- Langford, Joe, and Pauline Rose Clance 1993: 'The Impostor Phenomenon: Recent Research Findings Regarding Dynamics, Personality and Family Patterns and the Implications for Treatment'. *Psychotherapy*, 30(3), pp. 495-501.
- Leonhardt, Mona, Myriam N. Bechtoldt, and Sonja Rohrmann 2017: 'All Impostors Aren't Alike – Differentiating the Impostor Phenomenon'. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8, p.1505.
- Leslie, Sarah-Jane, Andrei Cimpian, Meredith Meyer, and Edward Freeland 2015: 'Expectations of Brilliance Underlie Gender Distributions Across Academic Disciplines'. *Science*, 347(6219), pp. 262-265.
- Lige, Quiera M., Bridgette J. Peteet, and Carrie M. Brown 2017: 'Racial Identity, Self-Esteem, and the Impostor Phenomenon Among African American College Students'. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 43(4), pp. 345-57.
- MacNeill, Lillian, Adam Driscoll, and Andrea N. Hunt 2015: 'What's in a name? Exposing gender bias in student ratings of teaching'. *Innovation in Higher Education*, 40(4), pp. 291–303.
- Maitra, Ishani 2018: 'New Words for Old Wrongs'. *Episteme*, 15(3), pp. 345-62.
- Milkman, Katherine L., Modupe Akinola, and Dolly Chugh 2015: 'What Happens Before? A Field Experiment Exploring How Pay and Representation Differentially Shape Bias on the Pathway Into Organizations'. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 100(6), pp. 1678–1712.
- Peter, Laurence J. and Raymond Hull 1969: *The Peter Principle*, William Morrow and Company.

- Sakulku, Jaruwan and James Alexander 2011: 'The Impostor Phenomenon'. *International Journal of Behavioral Science*, 6(1), pp. 73-92.
- Saul, Jennifer 2013: 'Implicit Bias, Stereotype Threat, and Women in Philosophy'. In Katrina Hutchison and Fiona Jenkins (eds.) *Women in Philosophy: What Needs to Change?* Oxford University Press.
- Soteriou, Matthew 2013: *Thinking and Belief*. Oxford University Press.
- Stanley, Jason 2011: *Know How*. Oxford University Press.
- Steele, Claude M. and Joshua Aronson 1995: 'Stereotype Threat and the Intellectual Test Performance of African Americans'. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 69(5), pp. 797-811.
- Thomas, Gloria and Carol Hollenshead 2001: 'Resisting from the Margins: The Coping Strategies of Black Women and Other Women of Color Faculty Members at a Research University'. *Journal of Negro Education*, 70 (3), pp. 166-175.
- White, Roger 2005: 'Epistemic Permissiveness'. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 19, pp. 445-459.
- Williams, Joan C., Katherine W. Phillips, and Erika V. Hall 2014: 'Double Jeopardy? Gender Bias Against Women of Color in Science'. UC Hastings College of the Law, <http://www.uchastings.edu/news/articles/2015/01/double-jeopardy-report.pdf>
- Woodfield, Ruth 2016: 'Gender and the achievement of skilled status in the workplace: the case of women leaders in the UK Fire and Rescue Service'. *Work, Employment & Society*, 30(2), pp. 237-55.
- Young, Valerie 2011: *The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women*, Crown Business.