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Impostor Phenomenon: Overcoming Internalized Barriers and Recognizing Achievements

Queenena Hoang

The “impostor phenomenon” is the crippling feeling of self-doubt, intellectual inadequacy, and anticipated failure that haunts people who attribute their success to luck or help from others rather than their own abilities (Nelson, 2011). These feelings, often undetected by others, manifest as anxiety, self-deprecation, or an irrational fear of failure in light of previous success (Bernard, Dollinger, & Ramaniyah, 2002; Langford & Clance, 1993; Leary, Patton, Orlando, & Frank, 2000). Clance and Imes (1978) first discovered this psychological experience while studying high-achieving female college students and professionals and thus coined the term impostor phenomenon (IP). This article will explore the literature around IP, its impact on men and women, graduate level students, and senior student affairs practitioners in higher education, and offer insights and suggestions on how to navigate IP while working with students or colleagues.

Fraud, lucky, deceiving, incompetent – these words are often manifested in those who experience the impostor phenomenon. The impostor phenomenon (IP) is based on an internal feeling of fraudulence in areas of success and achievement. Those who suffer from IP believe they do not deserve their success, that their accomplishments were not achieved through genuine ability, but as a means of being fortuitous, having worked harder than others, or having manipulated other's impressions (Langford & Clance, 1993). Those who experience IP are constantly anxious about being exposed of their “phoniness” and, therefore, are extremely critical of their work and performance.

The sense of being a fraud is only one part of the impostor phenomenon as “victims of IP are caught up in a cycle of emotions, thoughts, and actions that can virtually control their lives” (Harvey & Katz, 1984, p. 2). Students can feel mediocre, unqualified, incompetent, and even stupid. These feelings will often transcend their academic work, professional jobs, leadership roles, and even their

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personal lives. “For some people who suffer from IP, the more successful they get, the more severe and crippling it becomes” (Harvey & Katz, 1984, p. 3).

The History of the Impostor Phenomenon

Clance and Imes (1978) developed the term impostor phenomenon to designate an internal experience of intellectual phoniness that seemed to be particularly prevalent amongst a select sample of high-achieving women (Clance & O’Toole, 1988). Clance and Imes (1978) interviewed 150 highly successful women who all obtained and earned degrees, high scores on standardized tests, or professional recognition from colleagues or organizations, yet these women still felt an internal lack of success.

Clance (1985) invented the Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (CIP) to help people measure and determine whether or not they have IP characteristics and, if so, to what extent they are suffering (See Appendix A). According to Chrisman, Pieper, Clance, Holland, and Glickauf-Huges (1995), since its formulation, two other separate scales have been developed to measure IP, including the Harvey Impostor Phenomenon Scale (HIP; Harvey, 1981), and the Perceived Fraudulence Scale (PFS; Kolligan and Sternberg 1991). Of the three scales, the validity of the CIP scale and PFS were proven to be most accurate and reliable when compared to the HIP scale. The CIP specifically measures fear of evaluation, fear of not being able to repeat success, and fear of being less capable than others.

According to Clance and Imes (1988), those that experienced IP often felt emotions or thoughts of being discovered as incompetent. They would attribute their success to hard work, luck, knowing the right people, being in the right place at the right time, or through interpersonal assets such as charm and adaptability. Those with IP tendencies have difficulty in accepting praise or recognition for accomplishments or positive feedback; they will constantly dwell or focus on negative feedback as a reason for their deficits, mistakes, or failures. While fixated on their flaws, those with IP are afraid of shame and humiliation associated with failure and the feelings of foolishness. And finally, those with IP tendencies will overestimate others’ intellect and competence while comparing their weaknesses with the strengths of others.

The Role of Gender in the Work Place and Classroom

Impostor phenomenon feelings were initially thought to be “most prominent among female college students” (Craddock, Birnbaum, Rodriguez, Cobb, & Zeeh, 2011, p. 432). Some researchers found that female students had higher correlations to IP feelings than their male counterparts, especially regarding internalized success, expectations of treatment, and fear of failure (Clance & Imes,

1978; Clance, 1985; Kumar & Jagacinski, 2006). This is especially true for female students who are in environments where society tells them they do not belong, such as fields of study like hard sciences or engineering (McIntosh, 1989). Similarly, senior level administrators that experience IP have feelings of being unqualified for the position. They may also assume they received the job based on qualities such as character or personality and not on experience or skills. IP feelings can be further perpetuated in work environments and settings that are dominated by men. Without actual examples of female role models in these higher-level administrator positions, women often question their skills and abilities to hold such capacities. Additionally, social and cultural factors can contribute to a woman's fear of succeeding. Psychologists suggest that women deny their success in a "man's world" in order to avoid the fear of power and rejection (Harvey & Katz, 1984). Additional research on this phenomenon examined the avoidance of success by women due to the fear of being penalized, criticized, rejected, or seen as unfeminine (Harvey & Katz, 1984). Although today's society is more accepting of women succeeding without paying a penalty or being socially rejected, it is still difficult for women to be as confident as men in senior level positions due to IP as well as other systems of oppression.

However, further research has found that men also experience the phenomenon similarly to women (Flewellling, 1985; Harvey, 1981; Imes, 1979; Lawler, 1984). Topping (1983) found that men, in fact, experience IP more frequently than women because men do not openly acknowledge the phenomenon and are more likely to shield those types of emotions or feelings. In order to uphold stereotypical masculine traits of being strong and unemotional, men will suppress negative thoughts or feelings. IP is exhibited differently for men, in that they feel the need to secure a "man's job" and must avoid traditionally feminine positions such as social work, teaching, nursing, and receptionist work (Topping, 1983). Men are afraid of the penalties that might result from having an atypical male role, or a position that might question his sexuality (Harvey & Katz, 1984). So for men that have IP habits, they may feel incompetent, untalented, or unacceptable towards society.

In the Classroom

Students who experience the impostor phenomenon are often the most energetic, bright, and hardworking students amongst their peers. Most studies and research around IP have been focused on graduate and doctoral students, and/or high achieving senior leveled administrators. Craddock, Birnbaum, Rodriguez, Cobb, and Zeeh (2011) interviewed six doctoral students in a higher education program in which all participants indicated feelings related to perceptions of IP. The authors found that family expectations, gender, graduate-level coursework, and participants' racial identities were influential in shaping IP feelings (Craddock et. al, 2011).

Students with IP tendencies will often compare themselves to other classmates, have feelings of academic unpreparedness, question their admissions to a graduate or doctoral program, or will attribute their successes (grades, awards, or recognition) to external factors and not acknowledge their own abilities. Students of Color, or students with other underrepresented identities, might question if they received admission because of affirmative action, which is frequently unwarranted and a false assumption. These internalized feelings can cause students to experience self-doubt, and therefore directly hurt their academic performances.

The Impostor Phenomenon Beyond the Classroom and Workplace

Although the impostor phenomenon is prevalent in the classroom and workplace, it is equally pronounced in other settings. The impostor phenomenon can also be manifested through social interactions, friendships, romantic relationships, and family relationships. In these interactions and relationships, “impostors” feel as though they are “putting up a false front” (Harvey & Katz, 1985). Victims of the impostor phenomenon believe that there is a specific, ideal role that they are supposed to fulfill. In their minds, “they just don’t live up to the image of what a [friend, partner, daughter, or sister] should be” (Harvey & Katz, 1985, pg. 63). In relationships, victims of IP magnify what they perceive as flaws and are then fixated and focused on how to improve and perfect those inadequacies. Similarly, in every day interactions it is important for those with IP to feel approved, accepted, and liked by others. However, people with IP explain that although the world sees them as being inherently good, deep inside they often feel “unworthy, mean, hostile, selfish, envious, and sometimes even evil. They believe that they have deceived others into liking or loving them” (Harvey & Katz, 1985, p. 92).

For some, family is the biggest influence toward IP feelings. There are many roles or labels by which a person with IP may feel judged or critiqued, for instance: “the smart one,” “the responsible one,” “the talented one,” “the sensitive one,” or “the good one” (Harvey & Katz, 1985, p. 135). Those who surpass the achievements of their family members may be afraid that “it’s lonely at the top.” Some students with IP may feel guilty about their educational or life successes, thinking that it is somehow wrong for them to be doing better than a parent or sibling (Harvey & Katz, 1985). This fear of success not only manifests itself in familial relationships, but in other relationships and other aspects of their lives.

Breaking Barriers: Implications for Student Affairs

For some, intrinsic motivation may be enough to get over their impostor phenomenon ideations. This can include thoughts such as, “I want to receive that degree. I won’t give up and have too much pride to walk away,” or “If I can do this, I will be able to help others in the future and walk with people as motivated

as I am,” or “I can be the voice of other People of Color who do not have the opportunities like I do,” or simply, “I know I can do this.” Harvey and Katz (1985) give eleven tips on how to work through these feelings, acknowledging that “IP will not disappear overnight, no matter what you do” (p. 207). These tips include making lists of “impostor feelings” and striking them out, isolating daunting tasks and breaking it down into parts, taking control of situations, practicing being your own person, teaching yourself to accept compliments, talking to others who might feel similarly, and simply owning and naming it (Harvey & Katz, 1985).

Although students or new professionals may feel as though they are alone in their impostor feelings, “research suggests that IP feelings are a normal part of graduate study” (Craddock et al., 2011, p. 11). The feelings occur when students are exposed to new environments or stressful and unfamiliar situations in which they feel less secure about their ability to succeed. It is important for faculty members and supervisors of graduate students to acknowledge and not dismiss IP tendencies that they might see. Other possible solutions to help mitigate feelings of IP can be through matching new graduate or doctoral students with a returning, more experienced student who can guide and mentor them through their first year. This can allow students to normalize the experience and offer coping strategies. Providing space and opportunities for students to have healthy dialogue can afford students the support they need to be successful.

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Appendix A

Clance IP Scale

For each question, please circle the number that best indicates how true the statement is of you. It is best to give the first response that enters your mind rather than dwelling on each statement and thinking about it over and over.

1. 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.

1	2	3	4	5
(not at all true)	(rarely)	(sometimes)	(often)	(very true)

2. I can give the impression that I'm more competent than I really am.

1	2	3	4	5
(not at all true)	(rarely)	(sometimes)	(often)	(very true)

3. I avoid evaluations if possible and have a dread of others evaluating me.

1	2	3	4	5
(not at all true)	(rarely)	(sometimes)	(often)	(very true)

4. When people praise me for something I've accomplished, I'm afraid I won't be able to live up to their expectations of me in the future.

1	2	3	4	5
(not at all true)	(rarely)	(sometimes)	(often)	(very true)

5. I sometimes think I obtained my present position or gained my present success because I happened to be in the right place at the right time or knew the right people.

1	2	3	4	5
(not at all true)	(rarely)	(sometimes)	(often)	(very true)

6. I'm afraid people important to me may find out that I'm not as capable as they think I am.

1	2	3	4	5
(not at all true)	(rarely)	(sometimes)	(often)	(very true)

7. I tend to remember the incidents in which I have not done my best more than those times I have done my best.

1	2	3	4	5
(not at all true)	(rarely)	(sometimes)	(often)	(very true)

8. I rarely do a project or task as well as I'd like to do it.

1	2	3	4	5
(not at all true)	(rarely)	(sometimes)	(often)	(very true)

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

1	2	3	4	5
(not at all true)	(rarely)	(sometimes)	(often)	(very true)

10. It's hard for me to accept compliments or praise about my intelligence or accomplishments.

1	2	3	4	5
(not at all true)	(rarely)	(sometimes)	(often)	(very true)

11. At times, I feel my success has been due to some kind of luck.

1	2	3	4	5
(not at all true)	(rarely)	(sometimes)	(often)	(very true)

12. I'm disappointed at times in my present accomplishments and think I should have accomplished much more.

1	2	3	4	5
(not at all true)	(rarely)	(sometimes)	(often)	(very true)

13. Sometimes I'm afraid others will discover how much knowledge or ability I really lack.

1	2	3	4	5
(not at all true)	(rarely)	(sometimes)	(often)	(very true)

14. I'm often afraid that I may fail at a new assignment or undertaking even though I generally do well at what I attempt.

1	2	3	4	5
(not at all true)	(rarely)	(sometimes)	(often)	(very true)

15. When I've succeeded at something and received recognition for my accomplishments, I have doubts that I can keep repeating that success.

1	2	3	4	5
(not at all true)	(rarely)	(sometimes)	(often)	(very true)

16. If I receive a great deal of praise and recognition for something I've accomplished, I tend to discount the importance of what I've done.

1	2	3	4	5
(not at all true)	(rarely)	(sometimes)	(often)	(very true)

17. I often compare my ability to those around me and think they may be more intelligent than I am.

1	2	3	4	5
(not at all true)	(rarely)	(sometimes)	(often)	(very true)

18. I often worry about not succeeding with a project or examination, even though others around me have considerable confidence that I will do well.

1	2	3	4	5
(not at all true)	(rarely)	(sometimes)	(often)	(very true)

19. If I'm going to receive a promotion or gain recognition of some kind, I hesitate to tell others until it is an accomplished fact.

1	2	3	4	5
(not at all true)	(rarely)	(sometimes)	(often)	(very true)

20. I feel bad and discouraged if I'm not "the best" or at least "very special" in situations that involve achievement.

1	2	3	4	5
(not at all true)	(rarely)	(sometimes)	(often)	(very true)

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Scoring the Impostor Test

The Impostor Test was developed to help individuals determine whether or not they have IP characteristics and, if so, to what extent they are suffering.

After taking the Impostor Test, add together the numbers of the responses to each statement. If the total score is 40 or less, the respondent has few Impostor characteristics; if the score is between 41 and 60, the respondent has moderate IP experiences; a score between 61 and 80 means the respondent frequently has Impostor feelings; and a score higher than 80 means the respondent often has intense IP experiences. The higher the score, the more frequently and seriously the Impostor Phenomenon interferes in a person's life.