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The relation between perfectionism and impostor phenomenon

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Abstract

Considering the lack of research regarding the association between perfectionism described by Hill et al. (2004) and impostor phenomenon, in this study I aimed to investigate the way these two variables relate one to another, on a sample of 129 Romanian students ($M_{age} = 21.79$, $SD = 1.28$). The instruments that I used were Perfectionism Inventory (Hill et al., 2004) and Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale elaborated in 1985. The obtained correlations were statistically significant for self-evaluative perfectionism and not significant for conscientious perfectionism. The multiple regression analysis showed that the impostor phenomenon was best predicted by the need for approval, organization and rumination dimensions of perfectionism. The obtained results, as well as their utility were thoroughly analyzed.

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1. Introduction

Perfectionism and impostor phenomenon are two complex traits, frequently associated with a variety of psychological problems or difficulties that are detrimental to the quality of individuals' life. Therefore, as a first step in order to obtain a better understanding of the way people with these tendencies think, feel and behave, and to further identify the most efficient methods to prevent or ameliorate the corresponding undesirable symptoms, the study of the relationship between these two variables has an uncontestable importance.

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Initially perfectionism was considered a one-dimensional construct described exclusively through its dysfunctional implications (e.g., Burns, 1980), but at the beginning of the 1990s a fundamental change of conceptualization has occurred when two different groups of researchers - Frost et al. (1990) and Hewitt & Flett (1991) – inspired by normal and neurotic perfectionism distinction which Hamachek had made in 1978, sustained its multidimensional nature and developed two representative measurement instruments that were extensively used across time by various authors (Stöeber & Otto, 2006). More recently, Hill et al. (2004) proposed a more comprehensive model of perfectionism obtained by combining the six facets identified by Frost et al. (1990) with the three ones identified by Hewitt & Flett (1991), eliminating the resulted redundant elements and adding two extra dimensions. The new model comprised two forms of perfectionism – conscientious and self-evaluative perfectionism, each one of them comprised of four distinct dimensions.

The impostor phenomenon was introduced in the literature by Clance & Imes (1978) and was defined as “an internal experience of intellectual phoniness that those who feel fraudulence and worthlessness in spite of outstanding academic or professional accomplishments have” (Clance, as cited in Fujie, 2010, p.1). Some of the main characteristics of the impostors are: the tendency to attribute their own success to external causes; the difficulty to accept others’ compliments or positive feedback; the fear that some important persons for them would eventually discover that they are less valuable than they seem; dread of evaluation; the tendency to overestimate others (Clance & Imes, 1978; Clance & O’Toole, 1988). The impostor phenomenon also includes six specific components that are present to a different degree from person to person: the need to be the best, the erroneous perception that superhuman qualities are normal, fear of failure, fear and guilt about success and the tendency to discount personal competencies (Clance, as cited in Sakulku & Alexander, 2011).

The relation between perfectionism and impostor phenomenon has been studied lesser using psychometric instruments and statistically verified data, although in the literature it seems to be sustained by a significant number of theoretical statements that suggest their coexistence. For example, the components of the impostors reflect some characteristics of perfectionism (the belief that personal performance is not good enough, ambitious goals, attention to details, fear of failure, the inexhaustible desire to obtain greater results etc.). Moreover, Kets de Vries (2005) even stated that perfectionism might be a factor that cause, increase and/or maintain the impostor feelings. Consistently, McGregor et al. (2008) showed that the persons with impostor symptoms were inclined to severely and constantly self-evaluate and criticize themselves even for the tiniest errors, and Thompson et al. (as cited in Gibson-Beverly & Schwartz, 2008) concluded that the impostors were more concerned about mistakes, less satisfied with their own results, and showed a higher tendency to overestimate the number of their mistakes and to less appreciate their own performance. Furthermore, Hewitt et al. (2003) showed that the impostor phenomenon was associated with the perfectionistic self-presentation strategy (perfectionistic self-promotion, nondisplay of imperfection, nondisclosure of imperfection), an interpersonal style frequently used by some perfectionists. Ferrari & Thompson (2006) obtained similar results for perfectionistic self-promotion and for nondisplay of imperfection and highlighted supplementary the perfectionistic cognitions that the impostors had.

On the other hand, according to Clance et al. (1995), the impostors usually react in two different ways when they face tasks that imply them being evaluated: either they overcompensate their fears by exaggerated preparation and extreme effort; either they engage in self-sabotage behaviors, like procrastination, followed by frantic last minute work. Based on common sense, I consider that it is plausible to expect that the excessive preparation may be associated with high scores on “planfulness” and “organization” dimensions of perfectionism, while the behavioral inconstancy, on the contrary. Therefore, I presume that in a group large enough to comprise both contrary types of impostors, there might be a low probability to result a significant association between fraudulence symptoms and these two dimensions of perfectionism. An extra argument for this hypothesis might be sustained by the previously results that revealed the fact that conscientiousness Big Five superfactor tends to associate in opposite ways with impostor phenomenon and perfectionism (Ross et al. 2001; Hill et al., 1997).

Considering all these findings and arguments, the objective of this study was to examine the relation between perfectionism described by Hill et al. (2004), and the impostor phenomenon. I aimed to present a detailed analysis, in which I considered all of the eight dimensions and two forms of perfectionism, as well as the global perfectionism score. Moreover, I aimed to identify the combination of perfectionism dimensions that might best explain or predict the occurrence of impostor phenomenon.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

The research group included 129 Romanian psychology students, volunteers from the same university ($M_{age} = 21.79$ years old; $SD = 1.28$). There were 17 males and 110 females (2 missing values), selected by age (young adulthood) and by year of studies (faculty final year). The participants individually completed the two questionnaires, during classes, without time limit. They were informed orally about their rights and the implications of their participation to this study. The answer form included a standardized instructing in which they were told that there were no right or wrong answers and that their honesty was essential.

2.2. Measures

The instruments that I used were Perfectionism Inventory (PI; Hill et al., 2004) and Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (CIPS) elaborated by Clance in 1985 (Chrisman et al., 1995). Both of them are self-report questionnaires, consisting of a number of items distributed on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). In this study, both of them showed great internal consistency (see Table 1).

PI comprises 59 items that can be used to calculate a separate score for each of the eight dimensions and two factors of perfectionism identified by Hill et al. (2004): 1) conscientious perfectionism defined by high standards for others, organization, planfulness, and striving for excellence dimensions; 2) self-evaluative perfectionism defined by concern over mistakes, need for approval, parental pressure and rumination dimensions. By summing the scores for the two factors, it results a global score that reflects the degree to which a person is generally characterized by perfectionism. On American samples the questionnaire proved to have good psychometric properties: test-retest fidelity (r ranging from .71 to .83), and convergent validity (Hill et al., 2004).

CIPS is a one-dimensional questionnaire, composed of 20 items that reflect the degree to which one tends to think like an impostor. The total score express the frequency of the impostor phenomenon symptoms. On American samples the scale showed good construct and convergent validity (Chrisman et al., 1995).

3. Results

The preliminary data analysis indicated 0.19% missing values for CIPS, and 0.27% missing values for PI. The results of Little's Missing Completely at Random Test allowed the application of Expectation Maximization Procedure for completing the missing values. The data were normally distributed for each scale, and there were not significant outliers. Therefore, all correlation coefficients were calculated using Pearson correlation test.

Table 1. Perfectionism and impostor phenomenon – correlation coefficients, scales' internal consistency, means and standard deviations

		CIPS		α	M	SD	
		r	r 95 % CI				
PI	Composite Score	.48**	[.33, .60]	.93	24.05	4.21	
	Conscientious Perfectionism		-.02	[-.19, .14]	.89	13.15	2.16
		High Standards for Others	.14	[-.03, .30]	.77	2.63	.72
		Organization	-.28**	[-.43, -.11]	.91	3.37	.87
		Planfulness	.11	[-.06, .27]	.82	3.65	.70
		Striving for Excellence	.02	[-.15, .19]	.77	3.50	.69
	Self-Evaluative Perfectionism		.68**	[.57, .76]	.95	10.89	3.06
		Concern over Mistakes	.62**	[.50, .71]	.89	2.41	.85
		Need for Approval	.73**	[.63, .80]	.92	2.84	.98
		Parental Pressure	.25**	[.08, .40]	.93	2.87	1.05
Rumination		.63**	[.51, .72]	.86	2.75	.88	
CIPS	Impostor Phenomenon	1	-	.91	52.37	14.06	

Note. $N = 129$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

As expected, the results revealed a significant positive correlation between total perfectionism and impostor phenomenon. The effect size was medium to large ($r^2 = .23$). More precisely, the impostor phenomenon was strongly associated with three of the four self-evaluative perfectionism dimensions (concern over mistakes, need for approval and rumination) and weakly associated with perceived parental pressure. On the other hand, there was a weak negative correlation between impostor phenomenon and organization dimension. This was the only significant correlation identified for conscientious perfectionism dimensions.

The strong association between impostor phenomenon and self-evaluative perfectionism, and the not statistically significant association between the first one and conscientious perfectionism were consistent with the results obtained for the dimensions that each of the two perfectionism factors comprises. The relation between conscientious perfectionism and self-evaluative perfectionism was weak ($r(127) = .27, p < .01, 95\% \text{ CI } [.11, .42]$).

Moreover, I conducted a stepwise regression analysis. The aim of this procedure was to establish the combination of perfectionism dimensions that most efficiently predicts the impostor phenomenon. The independent variables were all dimensions of perfectionism that correlated significantly with impostor phenomenon. The best prediction model proved to be the one comprised by the need for approval, organization and rumination dimensions ($R = .77; R^2 = .59; F(3, 129) = 62.57; p < .001$).

4. Conclusions

My findings regarding self-evaluative perfectionism dimensions reflect the fact that the persons with frequent impostor symptoms may also have a tendency to seek the validation from others, be sensitive to criticism, ruminate about less than perfect performance, concern over mistakes and resent a pressure to achieve excellence in order to obtain parents' approval. Besides, these results were concordant to the way Clance & Imes (1978) described the impostor phenomenon, as well as to the already mentioned research regarding their theory.

On the other hand, the absence of a correlation between impostor phenomenon and striving for excellence contradicts the characteristics of the impostor phenomenon. I presume that this result could be explained by the following possible interpretations: 1) striving for excellence might not be a representative tendency for the tested impostors; 2) there could be some unknown intermediary variables that affected the participants' answers; 3) some impostors might have had a distorted perception regarding the real level of perfection implied by their goals. The last explanation is based mostly on the way impostor cycle occurs, as described in the literature (Kets de Vries, 2005), cycle in which the impostors' unrealistic appraisal of personal standards might be one of the main factors that constantly strengthens the inauthenticity feelings. Moreover, the negative correlation between impostor phenomenon and hyper-competition, revealed by some authors (e.g., Ross et al., 2001), might suggest that the impostors' motivation for success could be associated rather with the desire to diminish the fraudulence feelings, than with the desire to win some kind of competition. Thus, considering all these arguments, I presume that, contrarily to the objective observations, some impostors might not perceive themselves as being strivers for excellence, and that this discrepancy could be reflected in the participants' answers given in this study.

The not statistically significant correlation with planfulness, as well as the significant negative correlation with organization, might be explained by the existence of the two types of impostors, already explained in this paper. Moreover, the fact that the organization dimension was one of the components of the best prediction model of the impostor phenomenon might suggest a greater participants' tendency for self-handicapping rather than for overcompensation behaviors. This possibility could be sustained by the studies that revealed a positive correlation between impostor phenomenon and self-handicapping (e.g., Cowman & Ferrari, 2002) and a negative one between the first and conscientiousness Big Five superfactor (Bernard, Dollinger & Ramaniah, 2002), considering the fact that perfectionists conversely tend to be conscientious persons (Sherry et al., 2007).

The obtained strong positive correlation with self-evaluative perfectionism and the not statistically significant correlation with conscientious perfectionism could suggest that the two perfectionism factors might correspond to the adaptive/functional versus maladaptive/dysfunctional perfectionism dichotomy extensively invoked in the literature (e.g., Ashby et al., 2012). However, when interpreting these results, it is important to consider firstly the fact that the research regarding this hypothesis has been rather mixed (Stöeber & Otto, 2006) and, secondly, the fact that in my study, the difference between the two factors was not as important as it could have been if, for example,

the impostor phenomenon had correlated positively with self-evaluative perfectionism and negatively with conscientious perfectionism. Therefore, I recommend further studies on this topic.

In conclusion, despite some methodological limitations (the weak representativeness of the group, the disadvantages of using self-report questionnaires and a correlational test), my study could have theoretical importance because it sustains statistically the characteristics of the impostors related to the perfectionistic tendencies described in the literature, as well as, to some limited degree, practical utility in different activity fields because it offers a minimum indication regarding the thoughts, feelings and behaviors of the persons with such traits, from the investigated population. In addition, this study could represent a basis for future research with a more complex design, a better external validity and a more relevant and better supported practical utility.

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