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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 uncontested 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.

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