



Does self-esteem mediate the association between parenting styles and imposter feelings among female education students?

Yosi Yaffe^{a,b,*}

^a Ohalo Academic College, P.O.B. 222, Katzrin 12900, Israel

^b Tel-Hai Academic College, Qiryat Shmona, Israel

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ABSTRACT

The study investigates the links between maternal and paternal parenting styles and the imposter syndrome among adult female students, while probing the meditative role played by self-esteem in this context. The sample comprised 182 female students ($M_{age} = 27.85$, $SD = 7.25$) who completed the Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI), the Impostor Phenomenon Scale (CIPS), and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES). The results of the analyses of the regressions models using SEM revealed that parental care is associated with students' lower imposter feelings via self-esteem, and paternal overprotection is associated with students' higher imposter feelings via self-esteem. Hence, parental care and overprotection may be related to female students' imposter feelings since they increase and decrease (respectively) their self-esteem which, in turn, affects their imposter feelings. The current study is among the first to demonstrate the mediation role played by self-esteem in the association in question separately for mothers and fathers, which contributes to facilitating the understanding of the etiology mechanism of the imposter phenomenon.

1. Introduction

Imposter phenomenon is a term coined by Clance and Imes (1978) to depict a steady tendency of individuals who consistently experience intellectual phoniness and hidden incompetence, contrary to their objective qualifications and actual accomplishments. Imposters cannot properly internalize their success. They feel as if they managed to fool everybody else into believing that they are very intelligent (Clance & Imes, 1978), and they may use measures to preserve this state (e.g., over diligence, intellectual inauthenticity, and charm). The most common imposter symptoms include reluctance to accept credit for accomplishments, feelings of self-doubt, and a tendency to attribute success to external causes (Clance, 1985; Robinson & Goodpaster, 1991). Individuals with imposter syndrome are constantly afraid that others will eventually unmask their fraudulence, to reveal they do not belong in their professional environment (Kolligian Jr & Sternberg, 1991; Wang, Sheveleva & Permyakova, 2019). This perpetual fear of being exposed takes its psychological toll on them, as imposter individuals tend to experience feelings of depression, stress, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Cusack, Hughes & Nuhu, 2013; Li, Hughes & Thu, 2014; Schubert & Bowker, 2017; Wang et al., 2019). Students and employees who cope with imposter feelings tend to experience heightened fear and anxiety over their performance (Cusack et al.,

2013; Halbesleben, 2006). They spend a great deal of energy in unmasking their perceived inadequacy by overworking and using avoidance strategies, resulting in low occupational satisfaction, high emotional exhaustion, and a greater risk of burnout (Crawford, Shanine, Whitman & Kacmar, 2016; Hutchins, Penney & Sublett, 2018).

According to Clance and Imes (1978), the imposter phenomenon is far more prevalent and intensely experienced amongst women, as its origins are predominantly rooted in a gender-based family dynamics. In this regard, the authors identified early family processes such as family comparison (e.g., between siblings) and parental expectations that could underlie subsequent imposter feelings especially among girls. Clance and her colleagues maintained that later in life impostor feelings are further reinforced amongst women, as they face society's gender stereotypes, where assertiveness and accomplishments are more socially acceptable for men than for women (Clance & Imes, 1978; Clance, Dingman, Reviere & Strober, 1995).

While the imposter syndrome was initially viewed as a gender-specific phenomenon of the socially underprivileged sex (Wang et al., 2019), later studies found this phenomenon to be present among men at a similar rate as in women (Langford & Clance, 1993; Rohrmann, Bechtoldt & Leonhardt, 2016; Wang et al., 2019). Despite some inconsistencies with research findings, whereby imposter fears were found to be stronger for females than for males (e.g., Kumar &

* Correspondence to: Ohalo Academic College, P.O.B. 222, Katzrin 12900, Israel.

E-mail address: yaffeyos@telhai.ac.il.

Jagacinski, 2006), the phenomenon is no longer considered as a gender-typical phenomenon (Leonhardt, Bechtoldt & Rohrmann, 2017). To date, there is growing evidence suggesting that moderate to intense imposter feelings are very prevalent phenomena in individuals of both genders (Clark, Vardeman & Barba, 2014; Hutchins, 2015; Sonnak & Towell, 2001; Urwin, 2018), with their ratio among some professional employees and students exceeding 40% on average.

In the last decades, researchers have devoted more attention to the aspects of parent-child bonding and child-rearing styles as part of the role of family dynamics in the etiology of the imposter phenomenon. The imposter phenomenon in adolescents and adults was linked with various marital conditions, including maladaptive parental functioning, parental substance use of alcohol, and certain styles of parenting behaviors in child-rearing (e.g., Caseiman, Seif & Self, 2006; Castro, Jones & Mirsalimi, 2004; Cusack et al., 2013; Robinson & Goodpaster, 1991). Yet, there are still too few studies that deal with aspects of the family environment (specifically, parent-child relationships and parenting rearing styles) in the etiologic context of the imposter phenomenon among youngsters and adults. Parenting rearing styles (below: parenting styles), an intrinsic familial aspect that represents an overall family climate in children's upbringing. The parenting style comprises certain goals and values and is composed of two main dimensions of parental behaviors: demandingness (i.e., control against autonomy granting) and responsiveness (i.e., care and warmth) (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Responsiveness refers to the extent to which parents are involved in their child's life and activities (Maccoby, 1992), reflecting their emotional closeness and acceptance of the child's emotions and behavior. Manifestations of parental acceptance toward the child such as support, care, affection, and nurturance are closely associated with children's psychological well-being (Khaleque & Rohner, 2002). Conversely, overcontrolling parenting (i.e., excessive regulating of the child's behavior, autocratic decision making, overprotection, and strict direction) were linked to numerous emotional deficiencies amongst children and adolescents, including low self-esteem, elevated anxiety, depression, and lacking autonomy (Cooklin, Giallo, D'Esposito, Crawford & Nicholson, 2013; Pinquart & Gerke, 2019; Yaffe, 2018). Further evidence suggests that these links between parenting and descendants' emotional difficulties may persist into adulthood (Day et al., 2018; Lu, 2019; Yang, Li & Lin, 2019).

The findings of one of the most cited works dealing with parenting styles in relation to the imposter phenomenon (Sonnak & Towell, 2001) have shown that perceived parental overprotection and lack of care are associated with higher scores of imposter feelings among British students. While the effects observed for the parenting styles in this study were relatively moderate, the participants' self-esteem exhibited a considerably stronger prediction (negative correlation) of the imposterism scores. Parental overprotection and self-esteem emerged as the only significant predictors in a model encompassing seven demographic and psychological variables, which accounted for 50% of the variance in the participants' imposterism scores. Interestingly, parental care significantly predicted imposterism scores only after excluding self-esteem from the model, raising the possibility that in the context of parenting styles, self-esteem may have an overlapping or mediating effect on imposter phenomenon.

In a later study, imposter feelings of adults with a wide range of occupations were predicted by their recollections of their parents' parenting styles. Specifically, perceived paternal (but not maternal) overprotection and lack of paternal care were directly associated with increased feelings of imposterism (Want & Kleitman, 2006). However, maternal care was negatively related to self-handicapping and maternal overprotection was negatively related to confidence scores. In turn, self-handicapping and confidence were found to be linked with higher and lower (respectively) levels of the imposter phenomenon.

Contrary to these findings, Li et al. (2014) found maternal parenting

styles to be stronger direct predictors of imposter phenomenon in adult American undergraduate and graduate students. In this study, maternal lack of care and overprotection predicted imposter feelings in both male and female students, while the paternal parenting styles were significant predictors of imposter feelings only among males. This parental differential effect with respect to imposter scores observed in numerous studies suggests that a separate examination of maternal and paternal contributions is necessary (Wang et al., 2019).

Similar to the earlier research findings, the direct connections observed in Li's et al. (2014) study between parenting styles and imposterism were for the most part of a small to moderate size. However, those studies using additional psychological variables that were in part correlated with parenting styles strengthened the predictivity of the imposter phenomenon. Thus, in the previous studies mentioned above, self-esteem and self-handicapping were strong antecedents of imposterism scores, and their predictions significantly improved the model explaining imposterism by the parenting styles. This evidence strongly suggests that some psychological variables may play a mediative role in the relationship between parenting styles and imposter phenomenon. This is particularly the case with self-esteem and anxiety, where the link with parenting styles is well established (see: Pinquart & Gerke, 2019; Yaffe, 2018). Self-esteem in particular was also found in numerous studies to be strongly inversely-related with imposter syndrome, notably amongst women (Chrisman, Pieper, Clance, Holland, & Glickauf-Hughes, 1995; Cusack et al., 2013; Lin, 2008; Schubert & Bowker, 2017; Sonnak & Towell, 2001), whereas its role in mediating and moderating the effects of parental variables in this context received little empirical focus.

While there is a strong theoretical rationale linking between parenting styles and imposter phenomenon in developmental terms (Wang et al., 2019), the current body of research lacks more empirical evidence to support this link. The intervening role possibly played by specific psychological variables with respect to the relationship between parental variables and the imposter phenomenon is also obscure. This is particularly true regarding those psychologic variables to which the association with parenting and imposterism is well established, such as self-esteem. Accordingly, the current study aims to seek further evidence for the relationships between parenting styles and the imposter phenomenon among adult female students, while accounting for the function of their self-esteem in this regard. Moreover, several works have demonstrated the differential parental effects of mothers and fathers on descendants' imposter feelings. Yet, the inconsistencies across studies with regard to this gender effect calls for more research to help illuminate this issue. By using separate reports on parenting styles for mothers and father (i.e., parental protection and care), the current study will be able to provide more empirical information regarding the significance of parental gender in the context of imposter phenomenon. The current study focuses on female college students in education programs, where the vast majority of the trainees are women. While previous research on imposterism encompassed students of both genders from various disciplinary fields, less is known about the antecedents of the phenomenon in female students who are about to become teachers. As the imposter syndrome is a phenomenon particularly relevant and common in populations of students and professional employees, the current study's findings drawn from this specific reference group may facilitate more understanding of the phenomenon's etiology. Our hypothesis was that parental care would be associated directly and indirectly (i.e., through self-esteem) with lower imposter scores, and that parental over-protection would be associated directly and indirectly (i.e., through self-esteem) with higher imposter scores. The participants' self-esteem was expected to be reversely correlated with their recollections of their parents' level of care and protection, and to be negatively correlated with their imposter feelings.

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