



Are Impostors playful? Testing the association of adult playfulness with the Impostor Phenomenon



Kay Brauer*, René T. Proyer

Department of Psychology, Personality and Diagnostics, Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg, Germany

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ABSTRACT

We extend the study of antecedents to the Impostor Phenomenon (IP) by examining associations with adult playfulness. Previous studies showed that playfulness is associated with positive psychological functioning (e.g., healthy coping strategies) and may serve as a protective factor to IP experiences. Aside from a global measure of adult playfulness (in the sense of an easy onset and high intensity of playful experiences along with the frequent display of playful activities) we also tested the association of the IP with four facets of playfulness; namely, Other-directed, Lighthearted, Intellectual, and Whimsical (OLIW). Correlational and regression analyses in two independent samples of students ($N = 244$) and working professionals ($N = 222$) have shown differential association patterns of the OLIW facets towards the IP while the unidimensional conceptualization of playfulness existed independently from the IP. In line with earlier research, the students demonstrated greater levels of IP than the working professionals and also correlational patterns differed. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

There is growing evidence in the literature that the Impostor Phenomenon (IP; Clance, 1985) has an impact on a broad range of variables in the private and work life. We aim to extend the knowledge on the IP by studying its associations with adult playfulness, an individual differences variable that allows people to (re)frame situations in a way that they are experienced as stimulating and/or personally interesting and/or entertaining (Proyer, 2017). Playfulness could potentially be seen as a protective factor against IP feelings as those high in playfulness show behaviors (e.g., liking to improvise) that are opposed to those expressed by IP high-scorers.

1.1. Impostor Phenomenon

The IP is characterized by the failure to internalize success despite the existence of external objective indicators (e.g., grades). Those high in the IP, hereafter named *Impostors*, report feelings of intellectual phoniness and the constant fear of being unmasked as an intellectual fraud. In anticipation of the exposure of their perceived fraudulence, Impostors engage in paradox behavior when confronted with new tasks—after

an initial phase of procrastination they tend to work on the assigned task in a frenzy manner causing mental and physical exhaustion to prevent the dreaded exposure (Clance, 1985). Since Impostors are by definition capable to master their assignments eventual success is discounted and attributed to luck/chance instead of ability. Hence, this fuels the self-conviction of the IP's defining intellectual fraudulence experienced by those affected.

A broad range of studies support the contribution of the construct to the literature as it demonstrates independence from theoretically related constructs such as perfectionism or social anxiety (e.g., Kolligian & Sternberg, 1991). Furthermore, IP-specific cognitions and behaviors have been well-documented (e.g., an external-instable attributional style solely appearing in success-related achievement situations; see Brauer & Wolf, 2016; Thompson, Davis, & Davidson, 1998). The location of the IP in broad personality frameworks such as the Big Five personality traits yield low expressions in Extraversion, Conscientiousness, and Emotional Stability (in data from the U.S. and Korea; Ross, Stewart, Mugge, & Fultz, 2001). Further, the IP exists independently from sex and type of profession (Sakulku & Alexander, 2011).

Numerous studies have shown that the IP affects psychological functioning negatively (e.g., associations with depression, impaired general mental health, distress and anxiety; see Kolligian & Sternberg, 1991; Rohrmann, Bechtoldt, & Leonhardt, 2016; Ross et al., 2001). Recent research also found that the IP affects the work domain. Neureiter and Traut-Mattusch (2016) tested samples of undergraduates and working professionals and found that the IP was negatively related to career planning and -striving, thus limiting the individual personal fulfillment.

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, Martin Luther University, Emil-Abderhalden Straße 26–27, 06108 Halle (Saale), Germany.

E-mail address: kay.brauer@psych.uni-halle.de (K. Brauer).

Further, students scored higher in IP than working professionals (Hedge's $g = 0.48$) and correlations to external variables (e.g., fear of failure, motivation to lead) differed between those groups (i.e., up to ≤ 0.53). Additionally, studies in samples of working professionals reported negative outcomes in variables such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and organizational citizenship behavior (e.g., Vergauwe, Wille, Feys, De Fruyt, & Anseel, 2015). Hence, there is good evidence that the IP has an impact on numerous psychological variables affecting people's major life domains. Thus, studying the association of the IP with an individual differences variable that is associated with better psychological functioning may be of interest for the identification of potentially protective factors – of which adult playfulness may be one candidate.

1.2. Adult playfulness

Adult playfulness is an understudied individual differences variable (see e.g., Barnett, 2007). The past years have seen an increasing interest in the study of adult playfulness which has contributed to a better understanding of the trait. For example, playful adults can be described as being high in Culture, being emotionally stable, and rather extraverted, but low in Conscientiousness (Barnett, 2011; Proyer, 2012a, 2012b, 2017). Further, playfulness is associated with positive psychological functioning (e.g., subjective well-being, relationship satisfaction, and a pleasurable and engaged orientation to life; e.g., Proyer, 2012a, 2013) and variables such as self-confidence (e.g., Proyer, 2013; Staempfli, 2007), and heightened positive and reduced negative emotions (e.g., Chang, Qian & Yarnal, 2013). People also seem to be aware that they can actively use their playfulness in such beneficial ways in their daily lives across different domains, for example, at work or in their leisure time (Proyer, 2014a). The same is true for variables affecting the work life since playful people have more positive and intrinsic attitudes (Amabile, Hill, Hennessey, & Tighe, 1994), show higher job satisfaction and -performance, and innovative behavior (Yu, Wu, Chen, & Lin, 2007). Among others, these correlates have been linked with play and playfulness eliciting positive emotions and, thereby, contributing to an individuals' well-being (e.g., Fredrickson, 2001; Panksepp, 1998; Yue, Leung, & Hiranandani, 2016). Overall, there is support in the literature for the notion that playfulness may serve as a contributor to positive psychological functioning.

Proyer (2017) developed a structural model for adult playfulness that differentiates among four basic facets; namely, (a) *Other-directed* (i.e., enjoy playing with others; utilize playfulness to cheer others up); (b) *Lighthearted* (i.e., a playful worldview that can also emerge in serious situations; liking to improvise; seeing life more as a playground than a battlefield); (c) *Intellectual* (i.e., liking to play with ideas and thoughts; liking wordplays and complexity; liking to see a problem from different angles); and (d) *Whimsical* (i.e., liking unusual/odd things in everyday life; being unconventional) playfulness. The facets have been derived from a multi-methodological approach including a thorough literature review (Proyer, 2017), psycho-linguistic (Proyer, 2014b), factor-analytic (Proyer & Jehle, 2013), and qualitative approaches (Proyer, 2014a). Moreover, Proyer (2017) has developed a 28-item subjective measure for the four components that yielded good psychometric properties, a robust factor structure, and good evidence for its validity, for example, convergent and discriminant validity has been demonstrated through correlations with other playfulness measures and there is substantial agreement between self- and peer-ratings among subscales. Further, a diary study showed the four OLIW-scales' criterion validity as they are robustly associated with behavior ratings (across 14 days) of playful behavior (Proyer, 2017).

1.3. The IP and playfulness

Already Clance (1985) has argued that Impostors lack experiences of play and playfulness in their early family environment. However,

developmental psychology highlights the importance of play and playfulness in human development. For example, Erikson (1980) notes that play (especially, in the *play age*) contributes to the development of one's competence (i.e., realistic self-evaluation), purpose, and security (instead of anxiety). Moreover, he argues that play and being playful remains important throughout adulthood, contributing to "restoring a sense of mastery" (p. 89) for one's inter- and intrapersonal challenges. In fact, there is also evidence that lay people see a mastery orientation as one of the functions of playfulness (Proyer, 2014a). Playful adults also utilize healthy (i.e., adaptive, stressor-focused) coping styles instead of avoidant, escape-orientated strategies (Magnuson & Barnett, 2013; Staempfli, 2007). In contrast, Impostors' thinking and cognition have been described as rigid (e.g., Clance, 1985; Flett, Stainton, Hewitt, Sherry, & Lay, 2012) which may hinder the ability to (re-)frame situations in a playful way (i.e., through cognitive manipulation and one's imaginal efforts; Barnett, 2011). In line with the literature, we argue that playfulness and its related behavioral and cognitive characteristics contribute to preventing IP-experiences over the course of life.

Chrisman et al. (1995) have tested this proposed association empirically. They administered Clance's IP scale (1985) and the *Need for Play*-scale (i.e., "[...] To relax, amuse oneself, seek diversion and entertainment. To 'have fun', to play games. To laugh, joke and be merry. To avoid serious tension"; Murray, 1938; p. 83) of Jackson's (1984) *Personality Research Form* and found zero-correlations ($r = -.02$, $N = 269$). It is evident that the *Need for Play*-scale only covers one part of what constitutes playfulness, but not its full range (see e.g., Proyer, 2012b, 2017). Meanwhile, a multi-faceted approach to adult playfulness has been favored in the current literature and, thus, a reevaluation of the relationship with the IP on a facet level is of interest as we argue that specific facets of playfulness and associated characteristics are relevant for the IP.

Foremost, we expect that *Lighthearted* playfulness predicts the IP robustly negative, as it is described as a thoughtless way of dealing with situations and being focused on improvisation (e.g., low worrying, waiting instead of planning ahead), thereby, displaying the conceptual contrast to the IP (e.g., worrying, self-doubt, perfectionism). Further, those high in the IP are characterized as being introverted, shame-prone, and as perceiving themselves as low socially skilled (e.g., Ross et al., 2001). We argue that such a personality outfit would make it difficult to interact playfully with others (e.g., teasing others playfully or enjoying as-if phantasies jointly) and, thus, *Other-directed* playfulness should be negatively associated with the IP. Further, we expect a small negative association with *Intellectual* playfulness since this facet contains aspects contiguous to creativity (e.g., dealing with new situations, play with ideas to solve problems) that may be impaired among those high in the IP. There is no indication in the literature for a particular association of the IP with *Whimsical* playfulness.

1.4. The present study

The main objective of this study is an in-depth analysis of the IP-playfulness relationship. We expect to replicate Chrisman et al.'s (1995) finding; namely, no substantial association between *global* playfulness (i.e., easy onset and high intensity of playful experiences along with the frequent display of playful activities; Proyer, 2012b) and the IP as we expect that those global features are unspecific for Impostors while more nuanced aspects covered in the OLIW-model (Proyer, 2017) of playfulness should contribute to explaining the IP. We will test our hypotheses by means of correlational analyses and stepwise linear regressions to identify the contribution of the playfulness facets in the prediction of IP scores. In line with Neureiter and Traut-Mattausch (2016), we will test our hypotheses in two groups (i.e., students and working professionals).

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