



Self-esteem as a mediator of the link between perfectionism and the impostor phenomenon

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ABSTRACT

Perfectionism has been linked to the impostor phenomenon; however, little is known about the underlying mechanisms of this relationship. Self-esteem was examined for its potential mediating role in the relationship between dimensions of perfectionism (e.g., discrepancy and standards) and the impostor phenomenon among 468 college students. Analyses indicated that self-esteem partially mediated the relationship between perfectionism and impostor feelings. Discrepancy had a positive direct and indirect effect on impostor feelings through the mechanism of self-esteem, while standards had a negative indirect effect on impostor feelings through the mechanism of self-esteem. Implications for enhancing self-esteem among students experiencing maladaptive perfectionism and impostor feelings are discussed.

1. Introduction

High-achieving students are at risk for experiencing heightened impostor feelings in an academically competitive and stressful college environment (Cokley et al., 2015; Henning, Ey, & Shaw, 1998; King & Cooley, 1995). The impostor phenomenon (IP) refers to the sense among high achievers that they are intellectually fraudulent and phony (Clance, 1985a, 1985b; Clance & Imes, 1978). Students high in impostor feelings place a great deal of pressure on themselves to excel and to demonstrate that they are deserving of success. While most students want to do well, impostors are more self-critical of their ability to excel and less able to internalize positive performance than non-impostors.¹ Specifically, high impostor feelings have been linked to an external attribution style (Brauer & Wolf, 2016), such that positive performance was attributed to external factors (e.g., luck or chance). Students who experience higher impostor feelings have sometimes been found to perform better in school and have higher grades (King & Cooley, 1995). In spite of this high achievement, impostors tend to have lower academic self-esteem and lower global self-esteem (Thompson, Davis, & Davidson, 1998).

Studies have shown that impostorism² is associated with negative mental health outcomes (Cokley, McClain, Enciso, & Martinez, 2013), including anxiety (Cokley et al., 2017) and depression (Clance & Imes,

1978; Cokley et al., 2017). Impostorism has also been linked to other personality traits including introversion (Holmes, Kertay, Adamson, Holland, & Clance, 1993), self-esteem (Schubert & Bowker, 2017) and perfectionism (Henning et al., 1998). Perfectionism refers to having high personal standards, being organized, orderly, and striving for perfection (Slaney & Ashby, 1996). Definitions of perfectionism often indicate excessive or extremely high personal standards, referred to as maladaptive perfectionism. While perfectionists and impostors are both driven to excel, perfectionists are driven by internal pressure of having high standards, whereas impostors are driven by an internal experience of intellectual phoniness.

Perfectionists sometimes set excessively high standards, are overly critical of their accomplishments, and strive for flawless performance in their activities (Stoeber & Otto, 2006). This maladaptive perfectionism, similar to impostorism, is linked to higher anxiety and depression (Black & Reynolds, 2013). While there is an obvious conceptual link between perfectionism and impostorism, it is unclear what mechanisms account for this relation. Prior research has found self-esteem to be a reliable mediator of relationships involving perfectionism (Deuling & Burns, 2017) and impostorism (Lige, Peteet, & Brown, 2017; Schubert & Bowker, 2017). However, a review of the literature indicates there have been no studies that have examined self-esteem as a potential mediating mechanism underlying the effect of perfectionism on impostorism.

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¹ Throughout this article impostor(s) refer(s) to those with high scores on the Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale while non-impostor(s) refer(s) to those with low scores. Scores of 40 or less indicate few IP characteristics; between 41 and 60 indicate moderate IP experiences; between 61 and 80 indicate frequent IP feelings; greater than 80 indicate intense IP experiences.

² Impostorism is considered a dimensional individual differences variable.

1.1. Perfectionism and impostorism

Hamachek (1978) conceptualized and operationalized perfectionism as a multidimensional construct comprised of both positive and negative dimensions. Hamachek (1978) theorized about *normal* versus *neurotic* perfectionism. He posited that normal perfectionists pursue perfection without incurring psychological harm, whereas neurotic perfectionists set virtually unattainable standards that lack context-specific flexibility, and thus experience chronic dissatisfaction as they continuously fail to meet the unrealistic standards they set for themselves. Hamachek's framework laid the groundwork for our current understanding of perfectionism as a multidimensional construct consisting of both positive and negative aspects.

Multidimensional perfectionism scales were later published based on the work of Hewitt and Flett (1991) and Frost, Marten, Lahart, and Rosenblate (1990); however, both scales measured antecedents, accompanying factors, or effects of perfectionism rather than the perfectionism construct itself (Slaney, Rice, Mobley, Trippi, & Ashby, 2001). To address this issue, Slaney et al. (2001) developed a measure of perfectionism that: (a) clearly specified the variables that define perfectionism; (b) paid attention to the negative and positive aspects of perfectionism; (c) was closely related to commonly held ideas about perfectionism; and (d) was empirically sound (Slaney et al., 2001). Slaney et al. (2001) utilized extant research and common understandings of perfectionism to construct their multidimensional conceptualization which can be understood as the interplay between an individual's personal standards, and that individual's perception of the discrepancy between their current performance, and those standards (i.e., performance evaluation). Slaney et al.'s *Almost Perfect Scale-Revised* (APS-R) measures these two dimensions. Individuals who score high on personal standards but low on discrepancy are considered *adaptive* perfectionists, while individuals who score high on both personal standards and discrepancy are considered *maladaptive* perfectionists.

Perfectionism and impostorism have noticeable similarities such that both constructs represent a performance and evaluation process (Brauer & Wolf, 2016; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Both are also linked to distress. Perfectionism has been related to negative outcomes, such as depression or burnout (Luo, Wang, Zhang, Chen, & Quan, 2016), which reflects a broader perfectionism-distress link (Blankstein, Dunkley, & Wilson, 2008). Impostorism is similarly related to distress variables such as anxiety and depression (Cokley et al., 2017). Furthermore, studies report a positive relationship between perfectionism and impostorism (Ferrari & Thompson, 2006; Henning et al., 1998; Thompson, Foreman, & Martin, 2000). Thus, the perfectionism and impostorism relationship can also be conceptualized within the broader perfectionism-distress relationship. Similar to the link between perfectionism and depression (Preusser, Rice, & Ashby, 1994), the link between perfectionism and impostorism may be mediated by self-esteem.

1.2. Self-esteem as a mediator

Several scholars have conceptualized a link between self-esteem and perfectionism. Blankstein et al. (2008) suggest that the relationship between self-esteem and perfectionism depends on the source of the perfectionistic standards. Moreover, socially prescribed perfectionism has been negatively linked to self-esteem (Hewitt & Flett, 1991), and self-imposed perfectionistic standards have been positively linked to self-esteem (Ashby & Rice, 2002; Grzegorek, Slaney, Franze, & Rice, 2004; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Similar to Slaney et al. (2001), Slade and Owens's (1998) dual process model of perfectionism suggests there are two kinds of perfectionists, adaptive and maladaptive, who demonstrate similar behaviors, but for alternative motives. Adaptive perfectionists are motivated by positive reinforcement and a desire for success, which can enhance one's self-esteem. On the other hand, maladaptive perfectionists are driven by negative reinforcement and a

desire to avoid failure, which can diminish self-esteem.

The link between self-esteem and impostorism has been understated (Schubert & Bowker, 2017). Conceptually, it follows that an individual who feels fraudulent despite their accomplishments would have lower self-esteem. Several studies have found a negative link between self-esteem and impostorism (Chrisman, Pieper, Clance, Holland, & Glickauf-Hughes, 1995; Sonnak & Towell, 2001). Schubert and Bowker (2017) reported that impostorism was negatively correlated with self-esteem and positively correlated with self-esteem instability. They concluded the critical role of self-esteem problems in impostorism, suggesting that people with low self-esteem are particularly vulnerable to impostor feelings. Neureiter and Traut-Mattausch (2016) hypothesized that low self-esteem was a precondition of impostorism, and found that low levels of self-esteem were correlated with high levels of impostor feelings.

In summary, self-esteem is a common mechanism that is related to perfectionism and impostorism. However, given the dimensionality of perfectionism, it is not clear how self-esteem and impostorism relate to discrepancy and standards. Furthermore, it is not clear what role self-esteem plays in the link between perfectionism and impostorism. The current study investigated the degree to which self-esteem is a mediator of the relationship between perfectionism and impostorism. Based on the differences in discrepancy and standards, the following hypothesis was made: Dimensions of perfectionism (i.e., discrepancy and standards) have different effects on impostorism. Given the role that self-esteem has played as a mediator of relationships between personality traits, the following hypothesis was made: Self-esteem mediates the relationship between perfectionism (i.e., discrepancy and standards) and impostorism.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants (N = 468) were recruited from a subject pool of students enrolled in the Educational Psychology department at a large public university in the Southwestern region of the United States. Of the participants, 262 (56%) were female, 184 (39%) were male, 17 (3.6%) did not respond, 2 (0.4%) chose "not listed," and 3 (0.6%) chose either transgender, gender queer, or gender non-conforming. Participants included 64 African Americans (14%), 131 Whites/European Americans (28%), 104 Latino/a Americans (22%), 131 Asian Americans (28%), 9 multiracial individuals (1.9%), 7 biracial individuals (1.5%), 5 Middle Easterners (1.1%), 1 Native American (0.2%), and 16 individuals who did not respond (3.4%). There were 37 first year students (7.9%), 108 second-year students (23.1%), 83 third-year students (17.7%), and 218 fourth-year students (46.6%), with 22 participants not responding. Regarding socioeconomic status, 88 identified as working class (18.8%), 196 identified as middle class (41.9%), 135 identified as upper middle class (28.8%), and 27 (5.8%) identified as upper class, with 22 participants not responding. The average gpa was 3.22, $\sigma_{\bar{x}} = 0.65$. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 30 years ($\bar{x} = 21$, $\sigma_{\bar{x}} = 2.1$).

2.2. Procedure

Participants completed measures online using Qualtrics survey software. The following measures were presented: demographics survey (racial identification, age, gender, classification in school, socioeconomic status, college cumulative and grade point average), *Almost Perfect Scale-Revised*, *Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale*, and the *Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale*. Participants were given course credit for their participation and the IRB approved this study.

2.3. Instruments

Impostorism was assessed using the *Clance Impostor Phenomenon*

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