



Are all impostors created equal? Exploring gender differences in the impostor phenomenon-performance link



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ABSTRACT

Some individuals report feeling inauthentic at work, and fear being found out as a fake or as someone who does not deserve their status or reputation. Termed the impostor phenomenon (IP), this pervasive feeling has recently gained traction and recognition in organizational research. However, the relationship between IP and performance is still not well understood. We present two studies that explore the relationship between IP, performance, and gender under two different conditions: feedback (Study 1, $N = 268$) and accountability (Study 2, $N = 250$). Results indicate that male IPs react significantly more negatively under conditions of negative feedback and high accountability. These findings reveal a complex relationship between IP and gender which demonstrate that imposters' gender could potentially exacerbate the negative effects of IP on work outcomes.

1. Introduction

The impostor phenomenon (IP) refers to individuals who feel like intellectual fakes, believing they fooled the people around them into thinking they are competent individuals (Clance & Imes, 1978). Examples of this exist in all life spaces, from the student who believes they were accepted into college due to an administrative mistake to the CEO who feels woefully misplaced in their role. In the 2015 Harvard commencement address delivered by Natalie Portman, IP resonated in Portman's recollection of her own experience at Harvard, stating “I felt like there had been some mistake...that I wasn't smart enough to be in this company, and that every time I opened my mouth I would have to prove that I wasn't just a dumb actress.” This is language typical of many successful individuals, and high-profile cases of IP are not hard to find. These individuals, called impostors, doubt their ability to be successful, feel inauthentic and deceptive, and that they do not belong in the roles they hold (Clance & O'Toole, 1987) - even when they experience success. As such, impostors have a difficult and complex relationship with their own performance.

Despite gaining achievements and holding accomplished roles, impostors experience and display negative feelings and attitudes (low self-efficacy, low affective commitment, lack of perceived organization support, maladaptive perfectionism) and engage in counterproductive behaviors (low citizenship behaviors, biased managerial decision

making, lack of career planning or striving) in the workplace that often stifle their progress (e.g., Bechtoldt, 2015; Grubb & McDowell, 2012; McDowell, Grubb III, and Geho, 2015; Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016, 2017; Vergauwe, Wille, Feys, De Fruyt, and Anseel, 2015). Together with research demonstrating no direct link between IP and task performance (e.g., Want and Kleitman, 2006; Thompson, Foreman, and Martin, 2000), we can conclude that the mechanisms connecting IP and achievement are not so clear and are likely influenced by boundary conditions. This inconsistency highlights the *enigmatic* nature of IP (e.g., Leary, Patton, Orlando, and Wagoner Funk, 2000), and begs the question: if impostors experience psychological barriers that have negative consequences on their careers (Jöstl, Bergsmann, Lüftenegger, Schober, and Spiel, 2012), when are they high achievers and when do they succumb to these negative expectations of themselves? In these exploratory studies, we investigate the role of gender, accountability and feedback on impostors' tendency to experience performance anxiety, reduce their effort, and demonstrate lower performance.

1.1. Impostor phenomenon

Clance and Imes (1978) coined the term “impostor phenomenon” to describe the tendency of some high achieving women to feel they are essentially phonies and faking their own success. Such individuals experience intense feelings of inauthenticity in their accomplishments; as

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stated by Clance and Imes (1978): “despite their earned degrees, scholastic honors, high achievement on standardized tests, praise and professional recognition from colleagues and respected authorities, these women do not experience an internal sense of success” (p. 1). In this way, impostors experience an inconsistency between what they think about themselves and what they believe the external world thinks about them. They believe they are not deserving of their success and constantly fear being evaluated negatively (Clance, Dingman, Reviere, and Stober, 1995) or “found out” for their fraudulence. Beyond its general association with anxiety (e.g., negative affectivity, neuroticism: Ross, Stewart, Mugge, and Fultz, 2001; Thompson et al., 2000), avoidance (Ross & Krukowski, 2003), and poor self-views (e.g., low self-esteem, low self-perceived intelligence: Kumar & Jagacinski, 2006), IP is inherently and specifically linked with the externalization or downplay of personal agency for one's competence and performance.

Theories of the self-concept have long since highlighted the emotional (Higgins, 1987) and behavioral (Burke, 1991; Swann Jr, 1983) reactions to perceived self-discrepancies, or discrepancies between self-views (what I think I am) and other-views (what I think others think I am). Individuals develop their self-views during childhood and early adolescent experiences (e.g., through parenting; Li, Hughes, and Thu, 2014; Thompson, 2004; Want & Kleitman, 2006) which become stable parts of their adult self-concepts (Bian, Leslie, and Cimpian, 2017). As a normal part of the identity process, individuals constantly compare information from their environment to their own self-concept, and experience self-discrepancies when they perceive their environment views them differently than they view themselves. Individuals experiencing self-discrepancies feel discomfort and are motivated to behave in ways that reduce such discrepancies, except in cases where reducing self-discrepancies results in risk of rejection (i.e., when an individual feels rejection is likely if he/she does not act in ways consistent with the way others see them; e.g., Kwang and Swann Jr, 2010).

Impostors suffer from self-discrepancies about their competence (e.g., they do not feel as competent as other people think they are), while at the same time doubt their personal capacity to boost that competence through internal means. Because impostors experience these competence-based self-discrepancies *chronically*, they often adopt coping habits through which they use external means of justifying poor performance (e.g., making situational excuses, rationalization, etc.) in order to resolve their self-discrepancies and avoid both discomfort and the consequences of being “found out” by others. Workplace situations that make salient an impostor's competence are more likely than others to trigger their coping tendencies; we review two common ones below.

1.2. Feedback

The relationship between feedback and performance is potent but may be more complicated than it seems. In encouraging individuals to either continue or stop engaging in certain behaviors, feedback inherently reaffirms or denies a receiver's fundamental assumptions about themselves or their work (Ilgen, Fisher, and Taylor, 1979). Negative feedback could prompt a self-discrepancy for some individuals, as evidenced by research noting reactions such as defensiveness and denial, and corrective behavior (e.g., increased performance) when favorable contextual factors are present (i.e., feedback is high-quality coming from a credible source and delivered in a considerate manner; Steelman & Rutkowski, 2004). This research supports the notion that individuals deploy cognitive and behavioral tactics to reduce self-discrepancies in the face of negative feedback.

Impostors, however, likely have different reactions to negative feedback. As discussed, impostors suffer from a perceived lack of personal agency, and believe they are incapable of having the competence others believe they possess. To impostors, negative feedback should validate their belief that they indeed fundamentally lack the competence to perform well, reinforcing their lack of agency and consequently inhibiting an increase in subsequent work effort. Supportively, IP

research has found that impostors experience negative emotions, such as guilt and humiliation, when receiving negative feedback, and even internalize blame for the failure and interpret a single feedback instance as indicative of their entire sense of self (Thompson, Davis, and Davidson, 1998). This pattern is in direct contrast to more normative reactions such as defensiveness, denial, or corrective behavior. This is likely because feedback provides activation of competence-based components of the self-concept, and IPs believe they are lacking such competency. To avoid risks associated with decreasing this type of perceived self-discrepancy, impostors tend to create an impediment to their success (e.g., Cowman & Ferrari, 2002; Want & Kleitman, 2006), such as not exerting enough effort, and then blame their eventual poor performance on that impediment. Because impostors believe they cannot improve their performance (and thus cannot demonstrate their competence through these means), they are more likely to utilize alternate explanations for poor performance to preserve others' view of their competence than non-impostors.

1.3. Accountability

Much like negative feedback, accountability should also activate competence-based components of the self-concept, and we suggest that it may likewise constrain impostors' performance. Feelings of accountability in the workplace cause individuals to believe that failure to perform appropriate actions will be met with personal consequences (Hall, Frink, and Buckley, 2017). Those who feel high levels of accountability typically expect they will need to clarify or justify their actions to a specific audience (Frink & Klimoski, 1998) and feel pressure to adhere to specific behavioral and social norms (Tetlock, 1983). In terms of the self in the workplace, accountability heightens the salience of an individual's competence-based self-concept, and the importance of acting in line with others' view of their competence. Whereas accountability may motivate non-impostors to enhance their effort in anticipation of such expectations (Hall et al., 2017), it should have the opposite effect on impostors. Impostors under conditions of high accountability should expect to perform poorly because of their self-perceived lack of competence, which should trigger anxiety and negative emotions, and motivate them to reduce their initial effort as a means of preserving how others view their competency.

1.4. The role of gender

Because much of the concern impostors experience stems from violating expectations, gender is likely to play a unique role in the relationship between IP and performance-relevant outcomes. As social role theory explains, we expect communal (e.g., warm, nurturing, domestic) behaviors from females and agentic (e.g., self-interested, assertive, independent) behaviors from males (Eagly, 1983). Through interactions with others, these behavioral norms are communicated and reinforced, ultimately becoming a part of an individual's identity. One aspect of gender role prescriptions that tends to differ between males and females is individual competence, which has been considered a reason why females develop impostor feelings (i.e., young boys are socialized to be competent while young girls are socialized to be warm; Clance, Dingman, Reviere, and Stober, 1995). Fittingly, IP was originally studied to explain feelings of undeserved recognition and achievement specifically in professional women (Clance & Imes, 1978).

As such, gender was often studied in conjunction with IP and viewed as an important predictor. Currently, however, the evidence is contradictory. Some recent research points to a gender difference in prevalence and intensity of IP feelings (e.g., Jöstl, Bergsmann, Lüftenecker, Schober, and Spiel, 2012; Li, Hughes, and Thu, 2014), while others find no such relationship (e.g., Vergauwe, Wille, Feys, De Fruyt, and Anseel, 2015; Blondeau & Awad, 2016; Crawford, Shanine, Whitman, and Kacmar, 2016). Although these conflicting findings are likely due to sample context, it supports the notion that both males and

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