



Imposter phenomenon and self-handicapping: Links with parenting styles and self-confidence [☆]

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Abstract

This study examined parental rearing styles and objective confidence in relation to impostor phenomenon (feelings of phoniness experienced by individuals who have achieved some level of success, [Clance & Imes, 1978](#)) and self-handicapping tendencies (creation of an impediment to performance as an excuse for possible failure, [Jones & Berglas, 1978](#)). Participants ($N = 115$) completed measures of impostorism, self-handicapping, parental bonding (for each parent) and Esoteric Analogies test with confidence judgments. Impostor feelings were predicted by *paternal* overprotection and lack of *paternal* care. Self-handicapping scores were predicted by lack of *maternal* care. A significant relationship was found between impostorism and self-handicapping. Supporting the nature of the impostor phenomenon, impostors showed a “gap” between assessment of their performance and actual task-related achievements.

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[☆] The study reported in this manuscript was conducted at the University of New England, Australia.

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1. Introduction

Based on clinical interviews with high achieving women, [Clance and Imes \(1978\)](#) suggested the term Impostor Phenomenon (IP) to describe the intense feelings of intellectual phoniness experienced by some of these women. They defined impostors as people who believe that their success in life is “fake” being due to luck, charm or extra hard work, hence they avoid situations where they might be “found out”. Self-handicapping (SH) is one strategy used to avoid negative evaluations, providing for possible failure to be attributed to the handicap, rather than the person. A substantial relationship is known to exist between IP and SH (e.g., [Cowman & Ferrari, 2002](#); [Ross, Stewart, Mugge, & Fultz, 2001](#)), and the constructs appear to share several affective components, including low levels of self-confidence. Current research as to the developmental antecedents of IP and SH shows that parenting style may contribute to both constructs (e.g., [Greaven, Santor, Thompson, & Zuroff, 2000](#); [Sonnak & Towell, 2001](#)).

2. The impostor phenomenon

The term “Impostor Phenomenon” (IP) was inspired by reports that despite objective evidence of success, some people felt simply “phony”, that they had managed to fool the people around them (see [Topping & Kimmel, 1985](#)). [Clance and Imes \(1978\)](#) described symptoms such as depression, anxiety, lack of self-confidence and frustration at an inability to meet self-imposed high standards (see also [Thompson, Davis, & Davidson, 1998](#)). Upon receiving an achievement-related task, impostors tend to either overprepare or procrastinate in an effort to avoid possible failure, they then attribute their success to effort or to luck, respectively. Symptoms are reported by males and females in both clinical and non-clinical populations ([Cozzarelli & Major, 1990](#)).

There appear to be sound links between impostor tendencies and personality. Impostor feelings have been shown to correlate with Neuroticism, Conscientiousness and Extraversion personality dimensions (e.g., [Bernard, Dollinger, & Ramaniah, 2002](#); [Chae, Piedmont, Estadt, & Wicks, 1995](#); [Ross et al., 2001](#)). High Neuroticism and low Extraversion (as well as high Introversion) is a logical link with IP, while low levels of Conscientiousness may be explained by the procrastination sometimes used in evaluative situations. [Ross and Krukowski \(2003\)](#) reported a strong link between IP and maladaptive personality, such that IP was viewed as a maladaptive personality style “which emphasizes a pervasive sense of inferiority, fear and self-deprecation” (p. 477).

Feelings of anxiety ([Topping & Kimmel, 1985](#)), global negative affect ([Cozzarelli & Major, 1990](#); [Thompson et al., 1998](#)), and shame ([Cowman & Ferrari, 2002](#)) also have been found to correlate with impostor feelings. Additionally, [Langford and Clance \(1993\)](#) note that impostor behaviors result in an individual with an unstable sense of self-worth, who depends heavily on the feedback of others in order to maintain their sense of self. With their intense fear of failure impostors look for strategies to reduce the consequences of evaluative situations. Self-handicapping is one such strategy.

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