

## I FEEL LIKE A FRAUD AND IT DEPRESSES ME: THE RELATION BETWEEN THE IMPOSTER PHENOMENON AND DEPRESSION

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Are the negative thought patterns and self-doubt associated with the Imposter Phenomenon similar to the negative thought patterns and self-doubt that many individuals who have mild depression experience? If so, it is reasonable to believe that a relation between depression and the Imposter Phenomenon (IP) exists. The relation between the IP and depression among college students was examined. Results of a Pearson product-moment correlation yielded a positive correlation between the IP and BDI-II scores. Additionally, a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) using the IP scores and BDI scores as the dependent variables, with sex serving as the independent variable, revealed that men and women differ significantly on the combined dependent variables of IP and BDI scores. More specifically, the main effect between sex and IP score indicates that women have higher IP scores than men. However, the effect between sex and BDI was not statistically significant. Lastly, the implications of these findings are discussed.

*Keywords:* imposter phenomenon, depression, college students, successful women, women graduates.

Clance and Imes introduced the term *imposter phenomenon* in 1978 while working in therapeutic settings with over 150 high-achieving and successful

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women. The researchers found that despite the women's accomplishments and accolades many of them did not seem to internalize their successes. The researchers wrote, "...despite their earned degrees, scholastic honors, high achievement on standardized tests, praise, and professional recognition from colleagues and respected authorities, [imposters] do not experience an internal sense of success" (1978, p. 241). Clance and Imes referred to such individuals as Imposter Phenomenon Sufferers or IPSs.

The Imposter Phenomenon (IP), as described by Clance and Imes (1978), is characterized by strong feelings of intellectual and professional phoniness in high-achieving individuals. According to Clance and Imes, imposters entertain these thoughts and feelings despite evidence that suggests both outstanding academic and/or professional accomplishments. Clance and Imes wrote that "...women who experience the imposter phenomenon maintain a strong belief that they are not intelligent; in fact, they are convinced that they have fooled anyone who thinks otherwise" (p. 241). Imposters routinely give multiple, external explanations for their successes. These explanations often include such things as luck, coincidence, and even low expectations held by their supervisors. In addition to their feelings of phoniness, imposters fear that eventually others will discover that they are phonies and their true nature will be revealed (Clance, 1985; Clance & Imes, 1978; Matthews & Clance, 1985).

Participants in the Clance and Imes (1978) research were predominately Caucasian women between the ages of 20 and 45 years. However, more recent research has also examined the Imposter Phenomenon in African American students (Ewing, Richardson, James-Myers, & Russell, 1996), high school honor students (Cromwell, Brown, Sanchez-Huceles, & Adair, 1990), and male and female marketing managers (Fried-Buchalter, 1997). Additionally, researchers have examined the Imposter Phenomenon and its relationship to academic success (Harvey, 1981; Thompson, Davis, & Davidson, 1998), fear of failure, self-esteem and self-perception (Langford & Clance, 1993; Leary, Patton, Orlando, & Funk, 2000), Type A personality (Hayes & Davis, 1993) and depression (Harvey & Katz, 1985; Terry, 1991).

Bernard, Dollinger, and Ramaniah (2002) examined the relationship between the IP and the Big Five factors as depicted on the NEO-PI-R. Results indicated that high IP scorers were "disposed to feelings of depression and anxiety" (p. 329) regardless of their sex. Cowman and Ferrari (2002) examined the role of negative affect in imposters and proposed that imposters held a "devalued self-image" (p. 121). Clance and Imes (1978) and Steinberg (1987) both reported that many imposters frequently report symptoms of depression. Terry (1991) actually found a small relation between the IP and depression in college students. Finally, Thompson et al. (1998) reported that imposters registered more negative emotions than nonimposters. This research project re-examined the relation

between the IP and depression among college students. More specifically, we hypothesized that a relation between the IP and depression exists because the negative thoughts and self-doubt associated with the IP are similar to the negative thoughts and self-doubt experienced by individuals with depression.

## **METHOD**

### **PARTICIPANTS**

A total of 186 students attending a small liberal arts university in southwest Arkansas participated in the research. The students were enrolled in either a General Psychology course or an Introduction to Liberal Arts class. All students enrolled in the university are required to take the Liberal Arts course during their academic tenure. This is a 3-hour course and is offered each semester. The majority of students complete the course sometime during their freshman or sophomore year.

The sample consisted of a total of 71 men (38.1%) and 115 women (61.8%). Most participants identified themselves as Caucasian (90.9%); 5.9% were African American, 1.6% were Asian and less than one percent identified themselves as Latino. Three students (1.6%) listed their ethnicity as "other."

### **MATERIALS**

Each participant agreed to complete a questionnaire packet during a regularly scheduled class session. The packet contained copies of the Imposter Phenomenon (IP) Scale (Clance & Imes, 1978) and the Beck Depression Inventory (2nd ed.) (BDI-II); (Beck, Steer, & Brown, 1996). We also constructed and included a consent form and a demographic form.

### **PROCEDURES**

The entire packet took approximately 30 minutes to complete. We entered the classroom at the beginning of the session, informed the students of the purpose of the study and assured confidentiality. Additionally, we informed all students of their right to decline participation. Students who agreed to participate signed the consent form prior to receiving a questionnaire packet. Once students had completed the packet, we immediately collected all completed questionnaires, debriefed the students, and allowed them to ask questions. Finally, we informed the participants of how they could access the results of the project. Some instructors chose to award bonus points for student participation; however, this was at the discretion of the instructor.

## RESULTS

We performed a Pearson product-moment correlation using the IP and BDI-II scales as the dependent variables. Results yielded a positive correlation between the IP scores ( $M = 56.33$ ,  $SD = 11.59$ ) and BDI-II scores ( $M = 9.88$ ,  $SD = 7.90$ );  $r = .408$ ,  $p < .01$ . Additionally, we performed a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA). We used the IP scores and BDI scores as the dependent variables with sex serving as the independent variable (see Table 1). General assumption testing was conducted to check for homogeneity of variance-covariance, linearity, multicollinearity, normality, and univariate and multivariate outliers. We noted no serious violations of any assumptions. The men and women differed significantly on the combined dependent variables of IP and BDI scores,  $F(2,183) = 4.81$ ,  $p = .009$ ; Wilks' Lambda = .95; partial eta squared = .05. However, an independent examination of the dependent variables yielded a statistical significance only for the main effect between sex and IP score,  $F(1,184) = 9.06$ ,  $p = .003$ ; women had a higher IP scores ( $M = 58.30$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ) than men ( $M = 53.14$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ). The effect between sex and BDI was not statistically significant:  $F(1,184) = 3.90$ ,  $p = .050$ . Although the  $p$  value for both main effects was less than .05, these effects were evaluated using a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of .025; therefore, the effect between sex and BDI scores was not considered statistically significant.

**TABLE 1**  
**MULTIPLE ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE FOR GENDER, IP SCORE, AND BDI SCORE**

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>n</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>p</i>
Gender x IP score	1	9.06*		.00
Gender x BDI score	1	3.90		.05
Gender x IP and BDI	2	4.81*	.05**	.01

*Note:* Main effects were evaluated using a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of .025

\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*  $p < .05$ .

## DISCUSSION

Initial statistical analyses yielded a positive correlation between IP scores and BDI scores. Our data suggest that IPSs may indeed experience symptoms similar to individuals with mild depressive disorder. We are not suggesting that the imposter phenomenon causes clinical depression. Nor did we examine whether individuals who suffer from depression are more likely to be imposters or if imposters are more likely to experience symptoms of depression. This research simply indicated that a relation exists between the two conditions. It is important to note that Terry (1991) stated that the symptoms of depression “[do] not always accompany the IP experience” (p. 43). Our data simply suggest that individuals

who exhibit feelings of being an imposter may also struggle with the affects of depression. These feelings may then begin to “feed” off each other and may eventually serve as a debilitating factor to achieving success. Thus, individuals who feel like an imposter may not achieve as much as they are capable of because depressive symptoms may impede their productivity. It is also important to note that many imposters may attribute their thoughts to a constant way of thinking. That is, imposters are constantly evaluating their performance and they tend to be very tough critics on themselves. Therefore, imposters may not realize that their thoughts may possibly mask symptoms of depression.

Our research data also indicated that women differed significantly from men in their IP scores. These data mirror the findings of Clance and Imes (1978) and Harvey and Katz (1985) who found that women typically experience greater feelings of being an imposter than men. Yet, it is important to remember that the participants in this study were college students who were attending a private, liberal arts, church-related institution. Although we did not explore this, it may be an important factor to note.

Finally, the data suggest that although there is an interaction between the IP and depression, men and women did not differ significantly from each other on the BDI. These findings contradict the literature that often indicates a higher rate of depression among women than men (Comer, 1999). As mentioned earlier, we are not implying that the imposter phenomenon causes clinical depression. However, we are suggesting that individuals who exhibit feelings of being an imposter may also experience symptoms of depression.

The authors hope that this article will provide information to IPSs and therapists that may assist them in realizing that negative thoughts about performance may be indicative of the Imposter Phenomenon and these thought patterns are similar to symptoms of depression. This distinction is important because both avenues should be explored prior to developing a treatment plan for IPSs and those experiencing symptoms of depression.

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