

Imposter Syndrome:

The Convoluted Phenomenon and its Popularity in the Workplace

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Abstract

Imposter Syndrome, or the imposter phenomenon, recently permeated general public speech, specifically in the context of professional and academic life. People with imposter syndrome, imposters, are high achieving individuals who feel like intellectual frauds and who do not believe they deserve success. Although the general public adopts the term imposter syndrome into popular language, there is nearly “no empirical evidence on the imposter phenomenon or its effects” (Cozzarelli & Major, 1990). Research on imposter syndrome has tested the validity of the syndrome, looking at scales that test the phenomenon and their relation to scales that test low self esteem and anxiety. Results of such studies point to imposter syndrome being so convoluted with ideas of low self esteem and anxiety that it becomes difficult to separate it as its own phenomenon. This investigation looks into why the imposter phenomenon has made its way into popular language when there exists no empirical evidence to differentiate it from low self esteem or anxiety. Participants will be randomly assigned short biographies of high achieving adults who either have imposter syndrome, low self esteem, or anxiety. Participants will answer a series of questions, rating the high achieving adults, thus verifying that imposter syndrome is a less stigmatized and more attractive term than low self esteem or anxiety.

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Why is the Convolutd Phenomenon an Attractive Concept in the Workplace?

Introduction

In the workplace, it is not uncommon for people to feel as if they do not belong. Groups of people who are high achievers or perfectionists may feel as if they are phonies. Since the early 1970s, people have used the phrase imposter syndrome to describe people who feel as if they are not as competent as others believe (Carey, 2008). However, although people commonly identify with this term and self report to have the syndrome, psychologists themselves have not agreed on the fact that the imposter syndrome exists separately from other phenomena like low self esteem or anxiety. Regardless of the ambiguity around whether or not imposter syndrome truly exists, the professional world has become obsessed with the syndrome, advertising ways of combating it in the workplace.

Background/Related Work and motivation

Dr. Pauline Clance first described imposter syndrome in around 1985 after observing people in a clinical setting. She found that people with the phenomenon often experience “feelings that their achievements are undeserved and worry that they are likely to be exposed as a fraud” (Sakulku & Alexander, 2011). At first, people believed the phenomenon only affected women, but many studies have suggested that imposter syndrome affects a large range of people.

However, more current research tends to stray from empirically proving imposter syndrome. For example, researchers have recently found that many factors predict the imposter phenomenon, including perfectionism, anxiety, and depression (Sakulku & Alexander, 2011).

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These factors lead psychologists to question the validity of imposter syndrome as a differentiated trait from the predicting factors. Psychological research also suggests that although some self-reported imposters have true feelings associated with the imposter phenomenon, “individual reports of imposter feelings may reflect a self-presentation strategy instead of a true belief in their own inadequacies relative to others’ more positive views of themselves” (McElwee & Yurak, 2007).

At the heart of their research, McElwee and Yurak look into the validity of imposter phenomenon scales. They point out that an important part of the imposter phenomenon is that people will believe that others perceive them to be more competent than they perceive themselves; thus, their rating of themselves should be lower than their rating of how they believe others to view them (this is part of what differentiates imposter syndrome from low-self esteem). They explain that research has contradicted this in that most people who self report to have the imposter phenomenon typically will rate how others view them to be lower than how they view themselves, thus invalidating the imposter phenomenon as being separate from low self esteem (McElwee & Yurak, 2007).

When I worked at Google, numerous presentations were given on the topic of imposter syndrome and how to overcome feelings of being an intellectual fraud, so it was particularly surprising to see such little empirical evidence that the syndrome exists. The problem then becomes a question of why imposter syndrome has become so popular. Why is imposter syndrome such an attractive and common term in the workplace when it has not been proven to exist?

Methodology

I will be creating a survey in qualtrics to test how people react to empirically researched factors that are often predictors of imposter syndrome in relation to how they react to imposter syndrome itself. I will be looking at anxiety, depression, low self esteem, and imposter syndrome, and I will attempt to find out both if and why imposter syndrome is so popular compared to the other traits. Participants of the study will be picked through Amazon Mechanical Turk. MTurk is a crowdsourcing marketplace where people are hired to perform tasks virtually; such tasks include survey participation. I will have around 100 participants in my study.

I will be creating mock short biographies of people that describe their tendencies in the workplace. All of the biographies will explicitly state that the people are high achieving since that is an important factor of the imposter phenomenon. However, the biographies will also explicitly state how the people do not feel as if they belong or deserve to be where they are. The biographies will differ in that some will be people who have anxiety, some will be people who have depression, some will be people who have low self esteem, and some will be people who have imposter syndrome. These biographies will be randomly assigned to participants in the study. After reading the biography, participants will be given a series of questions ranking the people whose biographies they read. Questions will range from asking participants how likely they would be to hire the person they read about to how much they would want to work with the person in a career. I will be able to look at the results of this study to see which traits are preferred (less stigmatized traits) among individuals and which traits reflect poorly on the individuals (more stigmatized traits). Using this information, I will be able to come to a

conclusion for why imposter syndrome has become such a popular term to use in the professional world.

Expected Results

Based off of my research on both imposter syndrome or the imposter phenomenon and stigma as well as my observations in the workplace and in college, I expect to get answers to my research questions: Why is imposter syndrome such an attractive and common term in the workplace when it has not been proven to exist? Is there less stigma associated with imposter syndrome? I expect to see a difference in how participants respond to the biographies of people who are described as having imposter syndrome to how they respond to the biographies of people who are described as having anxiety, depression, or low self esteem. I would expect that people will respond in a more favorable way to the biographies that use the term “imposter syndrome” rather than the other terms, and I expect that this will be because of stigma. I assume that people would rather work with or hire the people with imposter syndrome.

Looking at the results of my study, I will write a paper on the outcomes of my study describing what the results of my survey say about imposter syndrome as well as about anxiety, depression, and low self esteem. The effect of such a paper will be the possibility for future research on the topic of imposter syndrome and specifically stigma around the imposter phenomenon, anxiety, depression, and low self esteem. Future research could include looking specifically at different phenomenons, including stereotype bias. The study could also be expanded to look at how the results might change based on the gender or race of the people described in the biographies as well as based on the gender or race of the participants. The study could also lead to further research related to whether or not imposter syndrome does exist as its

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own phenomenon. It is important to note that many people do feel the feelings described by the definition of imposter syndrome, so it would be interesting to look at further research related to why people tend to relate so much to such feelings.

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Timeline

I will complete my research over a period of 6 weeks. The first week will consist of my writing the biographies of people with either imposter syndrome, anxiety, depression, or low self esteem. I will also use this first week to begin writing questions that will be asked in the Qualtrics survey. The second week will consist of setting of Amazon Mechanical Turk to get 100 participants for my study. I will also use this second week to get familiar with Qualtrics and to set up my survey. The third week will be sending out the survey. During the fourth week, I will begin looking at the data I receive from the survey results. The last two weeks will mostly be the time I use to analyze the data and craft my essay on the findings of my completed study.

Budget

- \$300 for participant compensation
- \$1,200 for my time over 6 weeks
 - Total: \$1,500