



# The impostor phenomenon in British university students: Relationships between self-esteem, mental health, parental rearing style and socioeconomic status

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Received 25 February 2000; received in revised form 10 September 2000; accepted 23 September 2000

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## Abstract

The role of perceived parental rearing style, parental background, self-esteem, mental health and demographic variables upon *impostor phenomenon* [IP; *Psychotherapy: Theory Research and Practice*, 15, (1978) 241–247] intensity was investigated using a cross-sectional survey design, with 107 subjects (78 females, 29 males). A regression analysis revealed that both greater degree of perceived parental control and lower levels of self-esteem emerged as significant predictors of impostor fears, together accounting for 50% of the variation in impostor scores. Parental care score, parental educational and occupational level and subject's mental health and demographic information did not show a significant relationship to impostor scores. A post-hoc regression analysis indicated, however, that in addition to parental protection, lower care and poorer mental health was significantly related to increasing levels of impostor scores and with subjects having attended private school reporting lower levels of impostor feelings. In addition, subjects classified as impostors were found to report significantly higher GHQ scores (poorer mental health) than non-impostors. These findings, which are interpreted in terms of parenting styles, indicate that the role of parental overprotection may be especially implicated in impostor fears. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Impostor-fears; Self-esteem; Parental-rearing-style; Parent-child-relations; Socioeconomic-status; Mental health

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## **1. Introduction**

The nature of attributions within educational settings has been the focus of a substantial amount of research within the attribution literature (Houston, 1994) and an attributional achievement-related construct that has received much attention in recent years is the impostor phenomenon (IP; Clance & Imes, 1978). This term refers to the internal experience of intellectual fraudulence in individuals who, despite objective evidence of success in the form of outstanding academic or professional achievements, have a persistent, secret belief that they do not deserve their status or position. It is argued that these individuals attribute their feats not to their own ability but to external sources such as luck, fate, personal charm or attractiveness, secretly being convinced that they are less intelligent than other people believe them to be (Clance, 1985). In contrast to non-impostors, impostors fail to internalise their successes, believing that praise or approval is merely an indication that they have managed to deceive others into believing that they are successful.

Despite studies having found an association between trait anxiety and the IP (e.g. Topping, 1983; Topping & Kimmel, 1985), few studies have investigated whether impostors actually report poorer mental health. Chrisman, Pieper, Clance, Holland and Glickauf-Hughes (1995) found correlations between various measures of depression with Clance's IP Scale (CIPS). However, given that the correlations between the depression instruments were significantly stronger than that with each of these measures and CIPS, it was suggested that although CIPS overlaps with negative affectivity, it is essentially a separate construct. Studies have linked CIPS scores with neuroticism (Chae, Piedmont, Estadt & Wicks, 1995) and manic depressive tendencies (Lester & Moderski, 1995). Exploring which factors would predict psychological distress in medical, dental, nursing and pharmacy students, Henning, Ey and Shaw (1998) found that the CIPS score emerged as the variable that accounted for the largest proportion of unique variance in psychological distress score (as measured on the Brief Symptom Inventory).

With respect to the relationship between self-esteem and impostor fears, findings have been contradictory. Harvey (1981) found low correlations between IP scores, self-esteem and self-monitoring. However, several other studies have indicated that the IP is related to low global self-esteem (Chae et al., 1995; Chrisman et al., 1995; Imes, 1979; Thompson, Davis & Davidson, 1998; Topping & Kimmel, 1985) with Cozzarelli and Major (1990) suggesting that the IP may even be better seen as an extension of general poor self-esteem than as an independent construct.

A family structural variable that has received some attention concerns subjects' social mobility. Harvey (1981) found that IP feelings were linked with subjects' perceptions of being 'out of place' in relation to their familial status. Similarly, Hirschfield (1982) found that the most significant predictor of IP scores was the discrepancy between descriptions of ideal self and actual self on the Jackson Personality Inventory.

Dingman (1987) found that (upward) social mobility was a significant predictor of IP scores in females only. However, Lawler (1984) found no statistically significant differences for impostors compared with non-impostors when investigating atypicality within the family of origin in terms of educational attainment. Furthermore, college womens' self-perceived similarity to others in their field with regards to sex, race, age, personal appearance and socio-economic status (SES) has been found to be unrelated to the IP (Grays, 1985).

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