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Impostor fears: Links with self-presentational concerns and self-handicapping behaviours

Joseph R. Ferrari ^{*,1}, Ted Thompson ¹

Department of Psychology, DePaul University, 2219 North Kenmore Avenue, Chicago, IL 60614, United States
School of Psychology, University of Tasmania, GPO Box 252-30, Hobart, Tasmania 7001, Australia

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Abstract

Two studies examined impostor fears, self-handicapping and self-presentational concerns. In Study 1 (113 women, 52 men), impostor fears were significantly related to social desirability (low self-deception over impression management), perfectionistic cognitions, and non-display of imperfection to others. In Study 2, 72 women were exposed either to face-saving failure (failure that did not indicate low ability, thereby assuaging self-presentational concerns), humiliating failure (where no mitigating excuse for poor performance was available), or success. Following humiliating failure, participants high compared to low in impostor fears claimed more handicaps. However, when provided with a face-saving excuse, these participant groups did not differ in their propensity to claim handicaps. Together, these studies suggest that impostor fears are associated with self-presentational concerns in situations that involve threat to self-worth. However the link is with claimed, not with behavioural self-handicapping.

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Keywords: Impostor fears; Perfectionism; Self-handicapping; Self-presentation

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 773 325 4244; fax: +1 773 325 7888.

E-mail addresses: jferrari@depaul.edu (J.R. Ferrari), t.thompson@utas.edu.au (T. Thompson).

¹ Order of authors determined by alphabetical order; both authors contributed equally to Studies 1 and 2.

1. Introduction

The *impostor phenomenon* refers to intense and often paralysing feelings of intellectual phoniness experienced by many high achieving individuals (Clance & Imes, 1978). Despite objective evidence to the contrary, these individuals harbour resilient doubts about their abilities they consider are overestimated by others and a sense that it will be revealed by others that they are not intelligent; instead, they are “impostors” (Clance, 1985). Clance (1985) observed that repeated successes fail to weaken impostors’ feelings of fraudulence or to strengthen a belief in their ability. She argues that this is due to a pattern of behaviour that begins after an achievement-related task is assigned, involving worry, self-doubt and anxiety. Impostors react to these emotions by either extreme over preparation, or by initial procrastination followed by frenzied preparation (Chrisman, Pieper, Clance, Holland, & Glickauf-Hughes, 1995). If the task ends in success, a sense of accomplishment and relief is experienced. Nevertheless, once a new achievement task is encountered, feelings of anxiety and self-doubt recur and self-doubt continues (Thompson, Davis, & Davidson, 1998). Studies relating impostor tendencies with comprehensive models of personality find positive relations with Neuroticism and negative relations with Extraversion and Conscientiousness for Korean (Chae, Piedmont, Estadt, & Wicks, 1995) and American (Ross, Stewart, Mugge, & Fultz, 2001) samples.

1.1. *Impostor fears and perfectionism*

Leary, Patton, Orlando, and Wagoner Funk (2000) observed a paradox with central elements of the impostor phenomenon. While impostors fear that others will detect their inadequacies, they openly derogate themselves, externalise successes, dismiss positive affirmations of others, and report feeling fraudulent. Leary et al. reasoned that these behaviours may be a self-presentational strategy to secure positive impressions from others. As such, self-deprecation may be an intention to manipulate positive impressions from others by achieving at a high level *despite* claims of fluke performance, lucky situations, or favourable odds. In other words, claims of fraudulence and rejection of personal agency for success by impostors may reflect a desire to elicit favourable impressions from others when performing well despite claimed incapacity.

Consistent with this possibility, Leary et al. (2000, Study 2) found persons high compared to low in impostor fears expressed lower performance expectations on a bogus intelligence test when scores were known to another person. However when participants believed their responses would remain confidential, performance expectations were similar for participants high and low in impostor fears. Impostor fears were said to involve a significant self-presentational component. Thompson, Foreman, and Martin (2000) found that impostor fears were related to an exaggerated, perfectionistic concern over making mistakes, as well as lower perceptions of control and greater anxiety. Flett and Hewitt (2002) stated that a *perfectionistic concern* over one’s performance involved a strong self-presentational component, independent of trait perfectionism, but associated with rumination over performance outcomes, depression, anxiety, and high levels of stress (Flett, Madorsky, Hewitt, & Heisel, 2002). Hewitt, Flett, and Ediger (1995) reported *perfectionistic self-presentational* concerns were related to eating disorder symptoms, poor body image perceptions and low self-esteem. While Leary et al. (2000) found that impostor fears were related

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