

## IMPOSTER PHENOMENON IN ORGANIZATIONAL SETTINGS: AN INTERPLAY OF DARK TRIAD TRAITS

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### ABSTRACT

*At one point or another during the working phase of their lives, people experience the feelings of inadequacy and imposter phenomenon- a term defining an experience and feeling of fraudulence and phoniness about one's achievements and success. The three distinct but similar traits of the dark triad of personality (Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and Psychopathy) sharing a chief characteristic of callous-manipulation and always striving to be best at their work are more likely to manifest lack of confidence and self-doubt. The Imposter Phenomenon has previously not been studied in relation to any of the Dark Triad traits of personality and thus the aim of the present study was to determine the impact of dark triad on imposter phenomenon in the private sector employees. A sample of 200 regular employees falling in the age group 25-40 years, of a private sector organization was taken to study the same. The results indicated that the imposter phenomenon is significantly predicted by the dark triad traits (adjusted  $R^2=0.030$ ,  $p<.01$ ). While Machiavellianism ( $r=0.305$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and Psychopathy ( $r=0.157$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) shared a significant positive relation with the imposter phenomenon, Narcissism was not found to be significantly related to it. The present study might prove to be of use in identifying the concomitant factors underlying imposter phenomenon and the dark triad traits of personality.*

**Keywords:** *Imposter Phenomenon, Dark Triad Traits, Narcissism, Machiavellianism, Psychopathy.*

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### Introduction

*"Any moment, someone's going to find out I'm a total fraud, and that I don't deserve any of what I've achieved."*

*– Emma Watson*

Approximately 70% of people encounter the feelings of imposter phenomenon in their lives (Sakulku& Alexander, 2011). Dr. Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes (1978) first coined the term Imposter Phenomenon defining an experience and feeling of fraudulence and phoniness about one's achievements and success. A negative cycle of emotions and feelings is encountered by those who experience the imposter phenomenon. According to Clance and Imes (1978), people who experience imposter feelings often have very high and unrealistic standards of success and time and again cherish to entail best in everything, to be perfect and be special. Many predictors of the imposter phenomenon have been identified over the years. One of them is perfectionism and it is very evident that imposter phenomenon goes hand-in-hand with perfectionism. This has been supported the results of a study done on graduate students indicating that imposter phenomenon is prognosticated by perfectionism, anxiety and whether they have been graduated traditionally or online, among which perfectionism being the most dominant of all (Fraenza, 2016). Psychological well-being is often associated with the coercion to succeed and achieve high goals, hence resulting in psychological maladjustment, stress and tensivity in people experiencing the imposter feelings. In a research done on 161 academically talented Black and Hispanic students (Peteet et al., 2015), it was identified that low psychological well-being and low ethnic identity meaning that to what extent they identified themselves with their ethnic group are the potential predictors of the Imposter Phenomenon.

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Four family elements related to the child's imposter behavior have been identified by Clance (1986) as: (a) learning how to be smart, (b) possessing talents and achievements that are uncommon among the family, (c) perception of oneself in the family is different from that in the outside world, (d) open and real praise is very rare for oneself by the family and parents. Such family operations impact the overall psychological well-being of the child in a negative way leading them to encounter the imposter feelings in greater frequencies throughout their lives. A study revealed that IP is highly prognosticated by parental care and parental overprotection (Li et al., 2014).

Imposter phenomenon has also been studied by various researchers in context of several psychological traits and personality features. It was suggested by a study examining the role of IP in personality pathology that self-consciousness and anxiety certainly are chief qualities of people high on IP (Ross & Krukowski, 2003). A positive relationship was found between Avoidant and Dependent personality disorder characteristics and IP. On the other hand, Schizotypal and Histrionic personality disorder characteristics were found to predict IP positively and negatively respectively. A research study titled 'The Imposter Phenomenon: An internal barrier to empowerment and achievement' (Clance & O'Toole, 1988) advocated that imposter fears potentially hamper more with women's functioning as compared to that of men such as reducing their endeavour for high academic achievement and the like. The findings of a research study revealed significant positive correlation between Fear of Failure and the IP in both male and female managers, henceforth claiming that IP is not significantly related to the gender differences (Fried-Buchalter Boca Raton, 1997). The results of a study consisting of 588 employees revealed that imposter phenomenon shares significant inverse negative relationships with self-efficacy and perceived organizational support (Mcdowell et al., 2015).

The Dark Triad of personality was first described by Delroy Paulhus and Kevin Williams (2002) as an assemblage of three theoretically distinct but pragmatically overlapping personality variables namely, Narcissism (entitled self-importance), Machiavellianism (strategic exploitation and deception) and Psychopathy (callousness and scepticism). Although all the three components of the Dark Triad have unparalleled features and quirky correlates (Glenn & Sellbom, 2015), ample amounts of overlap made the researchers assert that these socially apathetic personalities should be studied in conjunction (Paulhus, 2014). It is made evident that Narcissism is a brighter personality trait than Psychopathy and Machiavellianism (Rauthmann & Kolar, 2012). A study revealed that the Dark Triad traits are related to more masculinity and less femininity (Jonason & Davis, 2018). Psychopathy and Narcissism were found to associate with more masculinity whereas less femininity was associated with Machiavellianism and Psychopathy.

Although all the Dark Triad traits are high in callousness and manipulation, it is indicated in the results of a study that the Dark Triad traits are also associated with aggression (Jones & Neria, 2015). Psychopathy and Machiavellianism were associated with the characteristic of telling more lies (Jonason et al., 2014). The use of various deception tactics, mainly intersexual and intra-sexual were also found to be associated with the Dark Triad traits. As suggested by Jonason & Schmitt (2012), people high on the Dark Triad traits choose friends for tactical purposes in order to create turbulent environments. The results of a study examining the toxicity of employees using various kinds of tactics at workplace due to the Dark Triad traits revealed that Machiavellians and Narcissists correlate as they both adopt soft tactics whereas Psychopaths and Machiavellians were correlated with adopting hard tactics (Jonason et al., 2012).

Unpredictable childhood basically establishes the link between the Dark Triad traits and socio-ecological conditions, whereas there is also a possibility that the traits have their own, less replicable, and robust links to economic harshness in childhood and adulthood (Jonason et al., 2016). Over the years, most of the researches on personality have concentrated on the Big Five traits. According to a study, the Dark Triad traits present in general populace are reported due to the low levels of Agreeableness (Jakobwitz & Egan, 2006). In contrary to this, it was found that low levels of Conscientiousness and high levels of Neuroticism supports the anti-social behavior. The different humor styles have been linked to a variety of different personality traits. Results of a study indicated more vulnerability for individuals scoring high on narcissism to employ a positive affiliative humor style, while on the contrary individuals high on Machiavellianism and sub-clinical psychopathy displayed considerable tendencies for employing humor styles that are negative in nature (Veselka et al., 2010).

Emotional intelligence or emotional self-efficacy being a trait is an assemblage of self-perceived emotions lying deep down in personality. The results of a research study made it evident that Narcissism share a positive relation with global trait emotional intelligence whereas Machiavellianism and Psychopathy are negatively related to it (Petrides et al., 2011).

The Dark Triad traits appear to be associated with an opportunistic, short-term mating strategy (Webster & Schmitt, 2009; Jonason et al., 2009; Jonason, et al., 2012). In short-term mating behaviors, sex-difference was found to be partially mediated by the Dark Triad (Jonason et al., 2009).

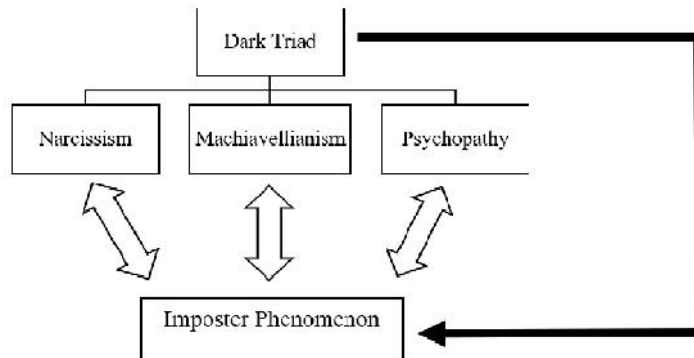
The Imposter Phenomenon has previously not been studied in relation to any of the Dark Triad traits of personality, with the exception for the recent study which suggests that both narcissism and imposter syndrome have some benefits as well as some fewer desirable consequences in organizations (Hoffman et al., 2017). Thus, the present study aims at examining the links between imposter phenomenon and the Dark Triad of personality as it might fill the gap identified in the literature and provide us with useful information regarding the impact of these variables on one's organizational performance and may also help in the development of some useful intervention methods which might help people realize their true worth and potential as well as enable them to realize their shortcomings. We hypothesized that there will be a significant positive relationship each between imposter phenomenon and Narcissism (H1), Machiavellianism (H2), and Psychopathy (H3). We also formulated a hypothesis that the dark triad will significantly predict the imposter phenomenon (H4).

**Method**

- **Sample**

The sample consisted of a total of 200 private sector employees (25-40 years of age) including both, males and females. Only those who were regular employees and were married, were included in the sample. Purposive sampling technique was used.

- **Research Design:** A causal research design was employed.



**Measurement Tools**

The impostor phenomenon was examined using the 20 item **Clance Imposter Phenomenon Scale** (Clance, 1985) and the 27-item **Short Dark Triad questionnaire** (Jones & Paulhus, 2014) was used to assess the Dark Triad traits of personality.

**Results**

**Table 1: Correlation between the three Traits of Dark Triad of Personality and Imposter Phenomenon on the Basis of the Scores Obtained**

Variable	Imposter Phenomenon	Machiavellianism	Narcissism	Psychopathy
Imposter Phenomenon	1			
Machiavellianism	.305**	1		
Narcissism	-.105	.265**	1	
Psychopathy	.157*	.255**	.052	1

**Table 2: Regression analysis with Dark Triad of Personality as a Predictor Variable and Imposter Phenomenon as Outcome Variable**

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	32.554	8.076		4.031	.000
	Dark Triad	2.292	.897	.188	2.555	.011

Note: Fit for model; R<sup>2</sup> =0.035, adjusted R<sup>2</sup>=0.030, F=6.528 (p<0.01)

It was evident from the results that the imposter phenomenon is significantly predicted by dark triad traits of personality with dark triad accounting for 3% variance in the imposter phenomenon scores (table 2). The results also indicated that, while both Machiavellianism and Psychopathy share a significant positive relation with the imposter phenomenon, Narcissism is negatively related to it (table 1).

### **Discussion**

The intent of the present study was to determine the role and impact of dark triad traits of personality (Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and Psychopathy) on imposter phenomenon in organizational settings, as well as to identify the pattern of relationship each one of the dark triad traits share with the imposter phenomenon. The participants were 200 employees of age group 25-40 years, working in a private sector set-up. The results showed that the dark triad of personality significantly predicts the imposter phenomenon. The results also indicated that while, imposter phenomenon shares a significant positive relation with Machiavellianism and Psychopathy, Narcissism was insignificantly related to it.

The results are discussed in detail as follows:

- **Imposter Phenomenon and Narcissism**

We hypothesized that there will be a significant positive relationship between imposter phenomenon and Narcissism. The results state an insignificant negative correlation of  $-.105$  between the two, which suggests that people who possess Narcissistic traits of personality usually do not experience the feelings of imposterism.

Living in an unreal and fantasized world of their own, surrounded by mistaken and distorted beliefs about oneself, Narcissists have an inflated sense of self in their make-believe world of immense potency, prosperity, and charisma. Thus, their possession of fantasized bubble of grandiosity, contrasts the concept of imposter phenomenon, and therefore this might be a possible explanation for our results. It is not possible for people who possess grandiose beliefs about one's potential and success, to experience the feelings of inadequacy and fraudulence at any point of time. They possess self-doubt by no chance, and hence are negatively related to the imposter feelings. Thus, the hypothesis was not supported.

- **Imposter Phenomenon and Machiavellianism**

Our hypothesis 2 stated that there will be a significant positive relationship between imposter phenomenon and Machiavellianism. The results supported our hypothesis indicating that imposter phenomenon and Machiavellianism share a significant positive correlation of  $.305$ , suggesting that individuals who possess Machiavellian personality traits also experience the imposter feelings.

Having characteristics of manipulateness and calculativeness, Machiavellian people often use and swindle other people for their self-interest and gains, without revealing their literal intent. When they achieve and accomplish things in life, they often feel phony and fear that they will be exposed as a fraud at any moment. Despite of their intelligence and skills of accomplishing whatever they want, they fear to be exposed as incapable and fraud. Instead of associating their success to factors such as their potential and skills of acquiring what they wish for using their social relations, they believe that they were able to get it by chance or luck.

- **Imposter Phenomenon and Psychopathy**

We also hypothesized that there will be a significant positive relationship between imposter phenomenon and Psychopathy. Supporting our hypothesis, the results indicate a significant positive correlation of  $.157$  between the two, suggesting that psychopaths also fall in the trap of imposterism easily.

Characterized by the behaviours of criminality, violence, lack of empathy, and critical ability, individuals possessing these psychopathic traits feel like a fraud, when they accomplish something. Being charismatic and self-serving opportunists, the psychopaths many a times doubt their potentials, expertise, skills, and capabilities, and often associate their success to the external factors of luck and fate. Always striving to be the best at their work, they are more likely to manifest lack of confidence and self-doubt, and hence experiencing the imposter feelings.

- **Imposter Phenomenon and Dark Triad**

Hypothesis 4 stated that the dark triad will significantly predict the imposter phenomenon. Our results support the hypothesis and indicate that the independent variable of the study i.e., the dark triad of personality, predicts 3% variance in imposter phenomenon, which is the dependent variable. The results also suggest that we can expect an increase of 2.292 units in imposter phenomenon, for every one unit increase in dark triad traits, assuming that the other variables (position in the organization) are held constant.

In other words, a one-unit increase in dark triad score would yield a 2.292 unit increase in the predicted impostor phenomenon. The noxious amalgamation of three socially apathetic personalities (Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and Psychopathy), characterized by arrogance, dominance, callousness and need to strive for the best, might induce feelings of fakeness and agitation of being exposed in working employees, leading to a hard time for them to impute their achievements and accomplishments, as a result of excessive lack of confidence and insecurities.

### Conclusion

It can be concluded that the imposter phenomenon is significantly predicted by the dark triad traits. It is also evident that Machiavellianism and Psychopathy shares a significant positive relation with the imposter phenomenon whereas, Narcissism is insignificantly related to it.

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