Understanding the Impostor Phenomenon in Managers

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ABSTRACT

The concept of "impostor feelings" or the impostor phenomenon, originally coined by Clance and Imes (1978), captures the internal experience of individuals who, despite evident success, persistently doubt their capabilities and fear being exposed as frauds. Initially conceptualized within clinical psychology and centered on high-achieving women (Clance, 1985), the phenomenon has evolved into a multidisciplinary domain spanning psychology, management, education, and healthcare (Bravata et al., 2020; Sakulku & Alexander, 2011). This paper traces the historical trajectory and scholarly evolution of the construct, highlights major contributors and explores emerging paradigms such as state-trait distinction and adaptive impostorism. It reviews measurement tools, identifies contemporary challenges in understanding and applying the construct in leadership settings and outlines future research directions. Using scholarly literature, this paper aims to contribute a consolidated academic foundation on impostorism among managers and leaders.

Keywords: Impostor Feelings, Clinical Psychology, High-Achieving Women, Managers, Leaders.

Introduction

Impostor feelings—also known as the impostor phenomenon or impostor syndrome—refer to the internal experience of high-achieving individuals who doubt their capabilities and feel intellectually fraudulent despite tangible accomplishments (Clance & Imes, 1978; Langford &Clance, 1993). This self-perception persists even when evidence of success is substantial, leading individuals to attribute outcomes to external factors such as luck or support rather than ability (Kolligian& Sternberg, 1991). The term "impostor phenomenon" has since become central to research in fields such as psychology, organizational behavior, and leadership studies (Chrisman et al., 1995; Bravata et al., 2020). Increasingly, scholars highlight the relevance of impostorism in professional roles where competence, visibility, and performance expectations are elevated—such as in management and executive leadership (Boese et al., 2022; Rohrmann et al., 2016). Managers may experience impostorism as internalized anxiety around decision-making, self-doubt in strategic contexts, and hesitance to delegate or claim authority (Leonard & Harvey, 2008; Fried-Buchalter, 1997).

Historical Origins of the Impostor Phenomenon

The term "impostor phenomenon" was first introduced by Clance and Imes (1978), who described it as the internal experience of intellectual fraudulence among high-achieving women. Their study, rooted in clinical observations, revealed that despite clear markers of success—academic accolades, professional accomplishments, and recognition—many women attributed their success to luck or external factors rather than ability (Clance & Imes, 1978; Clance, 1985). Clance (1985) later elaborated this phenomenon, highlighting its foundations in family dynamics, including inconsistent praise and sibling comparison. Shortly thereafter, Harvey (1981) advanced the empirical study of impostorism by creating one of the first psychometric assessments, the Harvey Impostor Phenomenon Scale (HIPS). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the concept gained traction across various demographics and disciplines (Henning, Ey and Shaw, 1998; Brems et al., 1994; Fried-Buchalter, 1997), pointing toward a

universal psychological experience of self-perceived fraudulence (Sakulku& Alexander, 2011; Cokley et al., 2013).

Evolution of the Concept and Research Domain

As the research base expanded, scholars began to embed the construct within broader psychological and organizational frameworks (Neureiter& Traut-Mattausch, 2016; Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017). A state–trait distinction emerged, recognizing impostorism as both a dispositional tendency and a contextually activated response (Tewfik, 2022; Leonhardt et al., 2017). The phenomenon was increasingly identified across gender identities, ethnic groups, and job roles (Cokley et al., 2013; Bernard et al., 2017). In management research, impostorism became linked to job satisfaction, burnout, leadership self-efficacy, and overwork (Fried-Buchalter, 1997; Rohrmann et al., 2016; LeFevre, 2016). Organizational culture, performance pressures, and leadership pipelines were found to reinforce impostor beliefs (Edwards & White, 2019; Hutchins, 2015; Ramsey & Brown, 2018), moving the phenomenon beyond individual pathology to a structural and systemic issue (Tulshyan& Burey, 2021).

Key Scholarly Contributors

The field owes much to foundational scholars such as Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes (1978), who defined the construct, and Joan Harvey (1981), who contributed empirical assessments. Jaruwan Sakulku and James Alexander (2011) offered a global synthesis of research. Neureiter and Traut-Mattausch (2016) connected impostorism to career development. Basima Tewfik (2022) introduced adaptive interpretations, while Hutchins and Rainbolt (2017) modeled its leadership implications. Gullifor et al. (2024) conducted an evidence-based organizational review, advancing integrative frameworks.

Emerging Paradigms and Perspectives

New paradigms include the trait–state distinction (Tewfik, 2022), adaptive interpretations of impostorism (Boese et al., 2022), intersectionality (Cokley et al., 2013; Peteet et al., 2015), and systemic critiques of organizational cultures that perpetuate impostor beliefs (Edwards & White, 2019; Tulshyan& Burey, 2021). The reframing of impostor feelings as functional in certain contexts (e.g., humility, motivation) signals a shift from deficit to strengths-based paradigms (Tewfik, 2022; Feenstra et al., 2020).

Evolution of Measurement Tools

The development of reliable instruments such as the CIPS (Clance, 1985; Chrisman et al., 1995), PFS (Kolligian& Sternberg, 1991), and IPSS-3 (Jansen, 2024) has shaped empirical research. Mak et al. (2019) highlighted scale limitations, particularly in cultural adaptability. Scholars advocate for dynamic, state-level assessments to capture contextual impostor fluctuations (Boese et al., 2022; Tewfik, 2022).

Major Issues and Challenges

Challenges include conceptual overlap with self-esteem and perfectionism (Langford & Clance, 1993; Leary et al., 2000), measurement reliability across cultures (Ghorbani et al., 2008), limited longitudinal data (LeFevre, 2016), and few tested interventions (Hutchins, 2015; Hicks, 2006). Organizational blind spots continue to underplay the systemic roots of impostorism (Ramsey & Brown, 2018; Edwards & White, 2019).

Knowledge Gaps and Future Directions

There is a need for longitudinal studies (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017), cross-cultural validation (Sakulku& Alexander, 2011), and theoretically grounded interventions (Hicks, 2006; Hutchins, 2015). Scholars must explore how impostorism affects innovation, ethics, and team dynamics (Boese et al., 2022; Edwards & White, 2019), and how it can be reframed for adaptive leadership development (Tewfik, 2022; Dweck, 2006).

Conclusion

The impostor phenomenon has matured into a global, interdisciplinary research domain with important implications for managerial practice. From its clinical origins (Clance & Imes, 1978) to its current integration into leadership studies (Boese et al., 2022), the construct has been shaped by evolving paradigms, refined measurement tools, and increasing recognition of systemic factors. While gaps remain in longitudinal understanding and intervention development, future research promises a more inclusive and strategic application of the phenomenon in advancing organizational well-being and leadership authenticity.

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