

The Phenomenology of the Impostor Phenomenon

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ABSTRACT - In the Impostor Phenomenon (IP), people who are objectively competent and successful report feeling secretly inadequate and fear detection of their incompetence. The IP has typically been studied using personality scales, but recent research has raised concerns about conceptualizing the IP as a personality trait. In the present work we approached the IP instead as an affective experience that can arise in anyone in response to certain evocative situations. Undergraduates ($N = 122$) described experiences in which they felt like impostors. Qualitative and quantitative analyses showed impostor episodes to be widely experienced and related to certain situational factors such as the relative status of the perceiver. Additionally, IP personality scales are shown to predict some features of people's impostor experiences. Results are discussed in light of IP theory and research as well as self-verification theory.

Researchers who study the Impostor Phenomenon (IP) attempt to understand individuals who are perceived as successful by others, yet fail to perceive themselves as successful or intelligent (Clance, 1985; Clance & Imes, 1978). Objectively, these "impostors" are successful and competent, but they have not internalized these attributes and instead feel like a failure, about to be "found out" by others (Clance, 1985; Kolligian & Sternberg, 1991). Research to date has addressed the IP as a stable individual difference variable and measured it using personality scales designed for this purpose. However, some research has documented concerns with the construct validity of scales used to measure impostorism and even with the fundamental view of impostorism as a personality trait (Leary, Patton, Orlando, & Funk, 2000; McElwee & Yurak, 2007). In this paper, we argue and present evidence that although impostorism is not best conceptualized as a stable personality trait, it is a true psychological experience that can arise in response to situations with certain features. Many people in those situations would experience feelings of impostorism, and thus impostor feelings can be present or absent in a given individual at a given time as a function of the situation. Our purpose is to examine what it feels like to be viewed more positively by others than one views oneself.

Several personality scales measure impostorism, including those by Clance (1985), Kolligian and Sternberg (1990), and Leary et al. (2000). All have acceptable psychometric properties such as reliability and convergent and discriminant validity as measured by the scales' correlations with other measures (cf. Cozzarelli & Major, 1990; Kolligian & Sternberg, 1991; Leary et al., 2000). However, reports from two sets of

researchers demonstrate that conceiving of impostorism as a stable personality trait is inadequate and is unsupported in important ways.

One central tenet of Impostor Theory is that impostors believe that they have others fooled, that others think they are more competent or intelligent than they know themselves to be. Empirical tests of this tenet have not yielded supportive data. Leary and his colleagues (2000) found that when people described on five dimensions their self-appraisals (how they see themselves) and their reflected appraisals (how others see them), there was no evidence that people with high scores on impostor scales actually thought others viewed them more positively than they viewed themselves. In fact, impostors reported low self-appraisals as well as low reflected appraisals, indicating an overall lack of positive regard for the self rather than the discrepancy predicted by the theory. These findings were affirmed and extended by McElwee and Yurak (2007) who found the same result using three different methodologies to measure discrepancies between self- and reflected appraisals. The lack of evidence that impostors actually think others view them positively weakens the concept of impostorism as a personality variable.

Support for impostorism as a personality variable is further weakened by evidence that impostors use self-deprecating statements as a self-presentation strategy. For example, Leary et al. (2000) found that people with high scores on impostor scales reported they would do poorly on an upcoming intelligence test, but only when they thought their responses would be public. In a private response condition, they did not predict failure. These findings were bolstered by McElwee and Yurak (2007) who found that impostor scales correlated significantly with other measures of self-presentation. The data supported the notion of impostor scales measuring a self-deprecating self-presentation strategy akin to self-handicapping. The link to self-handicapping among impostors is documented further by Cowman and Ferrari (2002) and Ferrari and Thompson (2006).

In response to evidence opposing the Impostor Phenomenon as a personality trait, McElwee and Yurak (2007) concluded that while the sum of the previous research is that impostor scales assess a stable individual difference attribute, that attribute seems to be more related to general negative affect and self-deprecating self-presentation than to actual impostor feelings. Although such evidence may lead some to discount the existence of the Impostor Phenomenon (cf. Tice & Wallace, 2003), we believe instead that a change of approach is warranted. Instead of conceptualizing the IP as a stable personality trait that people have to varying degrees, we argue that it is better conceptualized as an aversive affective state that can affect many people in certain situations (cf. Kolligian & Sternberg, 1991; Leary et al., 2000, who also suggested this possibility). This phenomenological approach to impostor episodes has not yet been studied empirically.

Our work documents the phenomenology of impostor episodes, in which people feel that others perceive them as more competent or accomplished than they perceive themselves to be. We examined individuals' descriptions of such episodes to identify their affective content and the situational and social antecedents and consequences. We also explored whether features of these experiences are related to individual differences on IP scales. That is, might people who endorse IP statements as self-descriptive report differing experiences of impostor episodes than do people who do not do so?

Although this was an exploratory study, we offered some predictions. Certainly, negative affect was expected to be inherent in the IP experience (McElwee & Yurak, 2007). Studies addressing the IP as a personality variable indicate that people who report feeling inadequate and fraudulent on these scales also experience myriad negative affective states including depressive symptoms (Kolligian & Sternberg, 1991), fear and anxiety for evaluation (Kolligian & Sternberg, 1991; Thompson, Foreman, & Martin, 2000), and low self-esteem (Cozzarelli & Major, 1990; Kolligian & Sternberg, 1991; McElwee & Yurak, 2007; Thompson et al., 2000).

We also expected negative affect to be central to the phenomenology of impostor episodes because people feel uncomfortable when others do not perceive them as they perceive themselves. Although common sense suggests people want to be viewed favorably, self-verification research shows this to be true only for people who view themselves favorably. People with negative self-concepts prefer interaction and relationship partners who confirm their negative self-views, or they feel uncomfortable and reject the positive feedback (Swann, Rentfrow, & Guinn, 2003; Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & Giesler, 1992). This provides another rationale for expecting these episodes to be couched in negative affect because by definition, in an impostor experience the perceptions of others are discrepant from one's self-view. Additionally, we expected people with high IP scores to report being more upset during the incident, perhaps due to the discomfort felt due to self-verification concerns (Swann et al., 2003; Swann et al., 1992) as well as their generally higher levels of negative affect (McElwee & Yurak, 2007).

Overview of the Present Study

Participants were instructed to think of a time when they experienced impostor feelings, that is, when someone else viewed them more positively than they viewed themselves, and they feared being "found out." They responded to open-ended and response-scale questions to describe the situation, events preceding the occurrence, their feelings at that time and in the present while recalling it, and information about the other person involved. The methodology used to ascertain the details of the event and participants' affective and behavioral responses to it was modeled after that used by Leary, Springer, Negel, Ansell, and Evans (1998) in their study of another negative affective experience, that is, interpersonal situations involving hurt feelings.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Undergraduates ($N = 122$) enrolled in psychology courses at a state university completed questionnaire booklets in the laboratory. Data from an additional 21 participants were excluded either because they did not complete the materials in a serious manner ($n = 1$) or because they described experiences that were not consonant with the Impostor Phenomenon ($n = 20$). These omitted experiences included some in which participants described episodes in which others viewed them less positively than they viewed themselves and some in which the participants intentionally deceived others about their qualifications (e. g., lied about their SAT scores). Of the remaining 122 participants, ages ranged from 17 to 44 years, $M = 19.64$, $SD = 3.01$; 90 were female and

32 were male; 79% were European-American, 7% were African-American, 7% were Latino/a, 4% were Asian-American and 3% reported "other" or did not respond. Participants were informed that the study addressed interpersonal relationships and completed informed consent forms. Following completion of the questionnaire booklets, they were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Materials

The first page of the questionnaire booklet began with the following instructions:

Think about a time that sticks out in your memory in which you felt that you were less intelligent, less competent, or less capable than other people perceived you to be. Maybe someone complimented your abilities in some particular area or commented about your accomplishments, but instead of feeling positive about those comments, you might have felt like a "phony." Perhaps you felt inadequate or had a fear that others would "find you out" and think that you aren't as capable as they originally thought.

Participants responded to open-ended questions in which they described the situation and experience, including how long ago the experience occurred; the setting in which it occurred (suggested examples were a job, academic setting, extracurricular club, etc.); the events that led up to or preceded the event; and the participant's view of how the other person perceived his or her abilities, competence, or intelligence.

Participants then rated on the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) how they felt during the event. The PANAS contains 10 positive (e.g., strong, inspired) and 10 negative (e.g., guilty, stressed) terms to describe affective states, each rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). Following the PANAS was an open-ended question where participants could list additional affective states they experienced that were not included on the rating scale.

The next questions addressed participants' response to and perceptions of the perceiver. Participants described any verbal responses they gave to the perceiver. They wrote onto a blank line their relationship with the perceiver (co-worker, boss, teacher, friend, etc.). Next, they compared the perceiver to themselves on 5 dimensions: *competent, confident, intelligent, accomplished, and in a position of authority* (rated on 5-point scales indicating the other person was *much less competent* to *much more competent* than the participant). Participants then rated how important the perceiver's view was to them on a 5-point scale from *very slightly or not at all* to *extremely*. The next question addressed whether the participant and the perceiver were alone during the event or whether others were present and could overhear the event.

Participants then described their feelings about the perceiver's mischaracterization. First, participants indicated the degree to which they wanted to correct the perceiver's perception at the time (from *very slightly or not at all* to *extremely* on a 5-point scale) and could check one or both of two reasons to explain their responses ("It felt good to have other people believing good things about me" and "I did not want any negative consequences to my job/grade/status to result from them knowing the truth.") A blank section was also included into which participants could write other reasons or thoughts regarding the issue of discovery and disclosure. Next participants indicated the degree to

which, if given the opportunity *now*, they would choose to correct the other person (again on the 5-point rating scale).

Participants then completed a second PANAS scale to reflect how remembering the situation made them feel at the current moment. Participants next indicated how often they experienced this type of situation and how often they believe the typical college student encounters such situations (on a 5-point scale from *very rarely or not at all* to *a lot*). The final section on this part of the questionnaire measured demographic variables including gender, age, and year in college.

To explore the role of stable individual differences in participants' experiences, the questionnaire also contained two measures of impostorism. First was the 7-item Leary Impostor Scale (LIS; Leary et al., 2000) that addresses specifically the inauthenticity aspects of impostorism. Respondents rated items such as "I am afraid people important to me may find out that I'm not as capable as they think I am" on 5-point scales from *not at all characteristic* to *extremely characteristic* (in the present study, $\alpha = .91$). Second was the Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (CIPS; Clance, 1985). Respondents rated agreement with 20 items such as "When people praise me for something I have accomplished, I am afraid I won't be able to live up to their expectations of me in the future" on a 5-point scale, from *not at all true* to *very true* (in the present study, $\alpha = .90$). Research reported by Chrisman, Pieper, Clance, Holland, and Glickhauf-Hughes (1995) indicated the Clance scale assesses three constructs: Fear of Failure, Attributing Success to Luck, and Discounting Achievements. We replicated that factor structure in the present study. A principal components analysis (PCA, using Varimax rotation) on the Clance scale defined three sets of items representing the constructs noted above. The Fear of Failure factor accounted for 26.78% of the variance ($\alpha = .89$), the Attributing Success to Luck factor accounted for 19.59% of the variance ($\alpha = .74$), and the Discounting Achievement factor accounted for 14.87% of the variance ($\alpha = .76$). To form separate variables for each construct, we averaged the items defining the factors. The impostor measures were counterbalanced and always appeared after the questionnaire on which participants described their impostor experience.

Results

Descriptions of Impostor Episodes

We begin by providing two episode descriptions to illustrate the level of detail and affect with which some participants reported their impostor experiences.

A 19-year-old female:

"...my program/major is perceived to be 'the best' with the highest-quality students enrolled in it. On numerous occasions, the girls in my program have been told we're 'so bright and outstanding' by professors, advisors, etc. Many feel only the brightest students make it into the program and by being here, it proves our intelligence and character. They assume we're all responsible, organized, hard-working, dedicated students. However, that's not the case. . .I felt ashamed. I was with 2 dozen girls who were bright and great people and I felt like I didn't

measure up to them. Like I shouldn't be here and I'm probably wasting somebody's time."

A 19-year-old male:

"I was talking to my history teacher and he mentioned that my JROTC instructors had said to him that I was one the best commanding officers that they had ever had. He told me he believed it because he had seen the others, and some of them were not so good. I asked him if what he was saying was true, because it sounded unreal to me. I used to feel inadequate compared to my predecessors because I felt like they did a good job, and I felt like I had big shoes to fill. It was hard for me to judge how well I was doing in comparison to them since my perspective changed from follower to leader."

Recency and Setting. The first analyses addressed the basic features of the episodes by evaluating their recency and the setting in which they occurred. Participants recounted episodes which occurred in a time range of "today" reaching back as long as 15 years. Of the 117 responses classifiable for chronological distance (excluding those such as "recently"), 71% described events within the past year; 29% of the total sample described events within the past month. All but 4 participants (3% of the total sample) described events within the past four years. Thus, participants described relatively recent events. However, 29% mentioned events that occurred more than one year ago, demonstrating that these events stand out in memory. When asked how often they experience such events, 4.7% reported *very rarely or not at all*, 36.9% reported *a little*, 42.6% reported *sometimes*, 14.8% reported *quite a bit*, and 1.6% reported *a lot*. When asked how often they think the average college student has these experiences, the percentages were 0.8%, 13.9%, 54.9%, 25.4%, and 4.1%, respectively. Overall, these students viewed these experiences as moderately frequent and tended to recall an episode that occurred within the past year or so.

Participants also described the setting in which the experience occurred: 42.6% reported being alone with the perceiver, while 56.6% reported being in a group or where others could overhear. Academic settings or skills were featured in 52% of responses, of which 11% mentioned writing ability; 8% mentioned artistic ability or knowledge; 10% mentioned math or science ability; and 66% mentioned experiences in which others viewed them as more intelligent, more accomplished, or exerting more effort in less specific academic domains (e.g., family members being overly impressed with their admission to college or classmates overestimating their knowledge in a given course). Employment settings or skills were featured in 16% of responses, while 21% involved extracurricular activities or skills (of which 56% involved sport/athletic activities and 28% involved artistic, music, or theatre activities). An additional 15% of the sample described experiences in which the other gave them too much credit for social skills or psychological strength. Thus, participants reported episodes in a wide variety of settings which are common in college students' lives.

Perceiver's Status. The next analyses focused on the perceiver's status relative to the participant. The perceiver was of equal/peer status in 58% of the episodes; perceivers were persons of authority in 52% of the episodes (percentages add up to more than 100%

because 7% of participants reported episodes involving both equal and higher status perceivers). One participant described an event in which the perceiver was a subordinate.

Recall that participants completed structured-response questions regarding how the perceiver compared to the participant on five status dimensions. For the first dimension, 39.3% of participants indicated the perceiver was equally *competent*, while 18.0% reported the perceiver to be less competent and 42.6% reported him or her to be more competent. The second dimension, *confident*, yielded 14.7% of participants viewing the perceiver as less confident, 31.3% as equally confident, and 54.1% as more confident. The third, *intelligent*, showed percentages of 13.9% as less intelligent, 47.5% as equally intelligent, and 38.6% as more intelligent than the self. Next was *accomplished*, for which 17.2% reported the perceiver was less accomplished, 16.4% reported the perceiver was equally accomplished, and 66.4% reported the perceiver was more accomplished. The last dimension, *in a position of authority*, yielded 9.8% reporting the perceiver of less authority than the self, 30.3% of equal authority, and 59.8% of higher authority than the self. Additionally, 9.0% reported the perceiver's view of them was *not at all* or *slightly* important, 19.7% reported it was *moderately* important, and 70.4% reported it was *quite a bit* or *extremely* important. Overall, participants reported the perceiver as being of higher status than the self on the five dimensions, though often of peer status in terms of social role, and whose impression was of considerable importance. Table 1 displays the means and standard deviations for these and other variables.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Between IP Scales and Impostor Episode Experiences

EPISODE FEATURE	M	SD	Leary IP Scale	Clance/Fear Failure	Clance Success /Luck	ClanceDisc. Ach.
Reported Frequency of Impostor Episodes for the Self	2.73	0.83	.45 **	.47 **	.30 **	.34 **
Reported Frequency of Impostor Episodes for the Typical College Student	3.18	0.76	.13	.22 *	.09	-.04
Affect at the Time of the Episode						
Negative: Fear/Distress	2.01	0.81	.30 **	.26 **	.20 *	.15
Negative: Guilt/Shame	1.93	0.85	.34 **	.35 **	.24 **	.17
Negative: Hostile/Irritable	1.51	0.63	.14	.08	.09	.05
Positive: Interest	2.91	0.88	.02	-.01	-.11	-.10
Positive: Determined	2.70	0.89	.08	.07	.07	-.08
Affect at the Time of Survey Completion						
Negative: Fear/Distress	1.38	0.70	.50 **	.40 **	.30 **	.25 **
Negative: Guilt/Shame	1.65	0.78	.48 **	.42 **	.27 **	.33 **
Negative: Hostile/Irritable	1.26	0.67	.34 **	.27 **	.18 *	.16
Positive: Interest	2.06	0.96	.21 *	.21 *	.22 *	.04
Positive: Determined	2.23	0.99	-.05	-.08	-.15	-.24 **
Number of Weeks Since Episode	66.38	104.44	-.10	-.10	-.06	-.08
Desire to Correct at the Time of the Episode	2.69	1.18	.22 *	.18 *	.12	.25 **
Desire to Correct at the Time of the Survey	2.07	1.12	.38 **	.25 **	.27 **	.29 **
Importance of Perceiver's Impression	3.88	0.96	.11	.05	.06	-.14
Relative Status of Perceiver (Higher numbers indicate Perceiver is Higher than Self)						
Competent	3.48	1.12	.08	.17	.11	-.07
Confident	3.60	1.10	.05	.21 *	.08	.01
Intelligent	3.41	0.99	.14	.13	.09	-.04
Accomplished	3.79	1.11	.03	.12	.05	-.13
In a Position of Authority	3.89	1.15	-.02	.02	.02	-.12

Note: * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

Participant Responses to the Perceiver and Desire to Correct. The third set of analyses evaluated participants' reported actual and desired responses to the perceiver. For the verbal response the participants gave to the perceiver, 32% were coded as "thank you," 24% were coded as a denial of the compliment, and 13% indicated both of those responses. An additional 6% agreed with the other, 5% responded that their

accomplishment was some version of “no big deal,” 10% reported no verbal response. The remainder gave miscellaneous responses such as “I hope so,” “I will try my best,” or explained their approach to the issue at hand, etc.

In response to a structured-response question regarding how much they wanted to correct the other’s impression at the time of the episode, 15.6% indicated *very slightly or not at all*, 32.8% indicated *a little*, 27.9% indicated *moderately*, 14.8% indicated *quite a bit* and 9.0% indicated *extremely*. Participants later indicated how much they would want to correct the perceiver’s view at the time of survey completion; 40.5% indicated *not at all*, 26.1% indicated *a little*, 19.8% indicated *moderately*, 10.1% indicated *quite a bit*, and 2.5% indicated *extremely*. Thus, between the time of the episode and the time of the survey, participants’ tendency to want to correct the perceiver’s impression decreased. Participants were also given the option to indicate whether they may not want to correct the perceiver’s opinion because “It felt good to have other people believe good things about me,” or “I did not want any negative consequences to my grade/job/status to result from them knowing the truth.” Participants had the option of checking neither, one, or both reasons: 38.0% checked the first one only, 19.0% checked the second one only, 38.0% checked neither, and 5.0% checked both.

Emergent Themes in the Narratives. Participants had three open-ended opportunities to describe their thoughts about correcting the perceiver’s impression or any additional thoughts about their experience. We describe here a summary of those explanations, collapsing across the three questions in light of our observation that participants wrote about similar concepts in the three places. After reading all of the descriptions, we developed a set of four coding categories capturing the central themes of the narratives. Each category and a few example statements are presented. Note that only explicit mentions of the category were tallied; other participants may have also felt these ways but did not spontaneously, explicitly mention them.

Desire for truth/self-verification: “I would rather have him know the truth”; “I did not want people to think I thought I was something I was not”; “[I would want to tell] just so they know how I feel about myself”; “I just didn’t want them to think I was smarter than I actually am”; “I want people to just take what I am for face value.” Statements fitting in this category were made by 21% of participants.

Fear of Excessive Future Expectations: “Now she has greater expectations which I don’t feel I can meet”; “I had some self-doubt about the level I’d have to rise to”; “My family expects me to make some massive impact upon this world and I live in constant fear of disappointing them.” Statements fitting in this category were made by 19% of participants.

Positive Affect as a Result of the Perceiver’s View: “It felt really good”; “I was elated”; “I felt good and impressed with her high expectations of me”; “It felt good to hear I did a good job and had made a ‘managerial decision’”; “I liked being respected by others for being good at two sports instead of one. It helped build me a solid reputation. I wasn’t about to mess that up.” Statements within this category were made by 18% of participants.

Motivating for future improvement: “It made me want to do better so I could be proud of myself”; “It made me want to work harder so that the next time I get a compliment, I would know I deserved it”; “It inspired me to be a math major”; “I felt that having their

confidence in me and not wanting to let them down helped me do better.” Statements fitting in this category were made by 7% of participants.

Affective Content of Impostor Episodes The fourth set of analyses evaluated the affective content of the episodes. A principal components analysis on the negative PANAS items identified three factors accounting for 68.40% of the total variance. Items such as *nervous*, *scared*, and *afraid* accounted for 28.88% of the variance and were averaged to form the Fear/Distress variable ($\alpha = .83$). Items such as *hostile*, *irritable*, and *upset* accounted for 21.13% of the variance and were averaged to form the Hostile/Irritable variable ($\alpha = .70$). Finally, the items *guilty* and *ashamed* were averaged to form the Guilt/Shame variable ($\alpha = .69$), accounting for 18.40% of the variance. The analysis of the positive items identified two factors accounting for 60.03% of the total variance. Items such as *interested*, *excited*, and *enthusiastic* accounted for 34.24% of the variance and were averaged to form the Interest variable ($\alpha = .84$). Items such as *inspired*, *determined*, and *attentive* accounted for 25.79% of the variance and were averaged to form the Determined variable ($\alpha = .80$). See Table 1 for means and standard deviations.

A repeated-measures ANOVA on the five means for affective state at the time of the episode revealed significant differences, $F(4, 480) = 64.32, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .35$. Pairwise comparisons revealed that all five means differed significantly from each other, $ps < .01$, with the exception of the Fear/Distress and Guilt/Shame factors of negative affect. As can be seen by examining the means in Table 1, the Interested/Excited positive affect factor had the highest mean, followed by the positive affect factor of Inspired/Determined, followed by the statistically equal Fear/Distress and Guilt/Shame factors of negative affect; lowest was the Hostility/Irritability factor of negative affect. For the PANAS describing participants' affective state at the time of the survey, a repeated measures ANOVA revealed significant differences, $F(4, 480) = 37.80, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .24$. Pairwise comparisons revealed that all means differed significantly with the exception of Fear/Distress and Hostility/Irritability; these were both significantly lower than the Guilt/Shame factor, and all three negative affect factors were significantly lower than the two positive affect factors. Here, Inspired/Determined was higher than Interested/Excited. These patterns make sense such that at the time of the incident, Fear/Distress and Guilt/Shame were equal, whereas Interested/Excited was higher than Determined. Upon later reflection, Guilt/Shame and Determined are more predominant emotions. For all 5 PANAS factors (3 negative affect and 2 positive affect), the feelings reported at the time of the episode were more intense than the feelings reported at present while recalling the episode, paired $t_s(121) > 3.40, ps \leq .001$, and each pair of measures (at the time of the episode and at survey completion) was correlated positively, $r_s(120) \geq .24, ps < .01$ (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics). Thus, participants felt the same patterns of emotion during the episode and at survey completion, but emotions were more intense during the episode rather than later recalling it. Note, however, that all of the affect means are below the midpoint of the 5-point scale, indicating a relative lack of strong emotion tied to these experiences. However, the differences in affective pattern between the time of the episode and the time of survey completion are meaningful and illuminative.

Readers may question whether the finding that positive affect factors are rated higher than negative affect factors indicate that impostor episodes are more fundamentally positive experiences. Two observations fail to support this interpretation. First, in the

content of participants' narratives and in the additional affect words listed after completing the PANAS initially, a clear tendency toward discomfort and stress is apparent. A total of 46 responses were listed by 36 participants. Of these 46, 5 were positive emotions, including *happy*, *accomplished*, and *confident*. The remaining 41 were negative emotions; 9 were *feeling inadequate* or *worried about failure*, 6 were *embarrassed*, 4 reported feeling *anxious* and 4 reported feeling *confused* or *skeptical*. Three reported feeling *shocked* or *surprised*. Other emotions included *depressed*, *uncomfortable*, *guilty*, *weak*, *deceptive*, *disappointed*, *overwhelmed*, *under pressure*, and *jealous*. Second, research studying other negative experiences has found the same pattern: for people being actively socially excluded (Buckley, Winkle, & Leary, 2004) and for cancer patients (Cole, Hopkins, Tisak, Steele, & Carr, 2008), positive affect is higher than negative affect.

The Relation of IP Scales to the Phenomenology of Impostor Episodes

The fifth set of analyses evaluated the relation of stable individual differences as measured by IP scales to participants' impostor experiences. Correlation coefficients can be seen in Table 1. As is apparent there, individual differences as measured by IP scales (Leary and the three Clance factors) were predictive of the reported frequency of IP episodes: those participants who experienced these episodes more often obtained higher scores on the IP measures. These measures did not predict the frequency with which participants indicated that typical college students experience such episodes with the exception of the Clance Fear of Failure factor.

The IP scales were also associated with participants' reported affective state at the time of the episode. In negative affect, the Fear/Distress and Guilt/Shame factors on the PANAS were predicted by scores on the Leary scale and the Fear of Failure and Attributing Success to Luck factors on the Clance scale, but were not predicted by the Discounting Achievement factor on the Clance scale. None of the IP scales predicted the amount of Hostile/Irritable negative affect reported or either positive affect factor on the PANAS. Thus, those scoring higher on IP scales reported more fear/distress and guilt/shame but did not differ on positive affect nor on hostility, compared to those scoring relatively low on the IP scales, at the time they experienced an IP episode.

Affective state at the time of survey completion was also correlated with IP measures, although the pattern was somewhat different than it had been during the episode. Specifically, the Leary scale and three Clance factors again predicted the Fear/Distress and Guilt/Shame negative affect factors. However, Hostility/Irritability and the Interest factor for positive affect were also correlated with the Leary scale and with the Fear of Failure and Attributing Success to Luck factor of the Clance scale. Additionally, the Clance factor of Discounting Achievement was associated with significantly lower scores on the Determined factor for positive affect. Thus, affective experience was more intense during the episode than when later recalling it, and individual differences in IP as measured by the traditional personality scales were associated with affective experience at both times, but in a more diverse pattern at the time of survey completion than during the actual episode. At the core of these findings is that people who score high on IP scales experience more fear/distress and guilt/shame in response to an actual IP episode than do people who score lower.

IP scores were positively associated with the desire to correct the perceiver's impression, both at the time of the episode and at the time of survey completion. Participants with higher Leary IP, Fear of Failure, and Discounting Achievement scores were more likely to want to correct the perceiver's impression at the time of the episode and at the time of survey completion. Scores on the Clance Attributing Success to Luck factor positively correlated with the desire to correct the perceiver's impression at the time of the survey but not at the time of the incident. Just as the affective pattern analyses showed that people who scored high on the IP measures experienced more distress at the time of the episode and at the time of the survey, these analyses also support that these people experience more of a desire to correct the perceiver's impression. This is consistent with a self-verification view of the Impostor Phenomenon, in which people who score higher on measures of IP report more discomfort with others' false views of them. However, endorsement of the two possible reasons why participants may not wish to correct the perceiver's impression (it felt good to have others think positive things about them, or they did not want any negative consequences to result from the perceiver knowing the truth) was not associated with any individual difference variable, $r_s < .21$, $p_s > .15$.

Additional analyses explored relationships between IP scales and affect variables and other features of impostor episodes. No significant relationships were found between chronological distance (excluding outliers of more than 4 years) and any IP or affect variable. The participants' rating of the importance of the perceiver's perception did not correlate significantly with any IP measure, but did correlate positively with heightened fear and distress at the time of the episode, $r(118) = .25$, $p < .01$, and at recalling the episode, $r(118) = .24$, $p < .01$. No other PANAS factor correlated significantly with this variable, $r_s < .10$, $p_s > .28$, with the exception of the PANAS factor of guilt and shame, which showed a marginally significant positive correlation at the time of the survey, $r(118) = .18$, $p = .052$. None of the IP scales were significantly correlated with participants' ratings of the perceiver's relative standing on the status dimensions (e.g., intelligent; competent) with the exception that those who scored higher on Clance's Fear of Failure factor reported that the perceiver was relatively more confident than the self.

Discussion

Documenting the phenomenology of impostor episodes is important because past research on the Impostor Phenomenon had yielded data largely nonsupportive of the IP as a stable personality attribute. Thus, this study explored the IP as an affective state resulting from circumstances in which one is evaluated "too highly." The rich data resulting from the qualitative and quantitative analyses herein suggest this is a fruitful approach.

Intuition might suggest that being viewed positively by others would always be desirable and satisfying. However, our data showed instead that negative affect is a common reaction to feeling that one's abilities are being overestimated. Most participants in this sample were able to describe in detail an episode in which they felt another was overestimating their abilities in an academic, employment, extracurricular, or social setting. Generally, the perceiver was of an equal or higher status than the participant in terms of role (e.g., fellow classmate or professor/ boss) but participants viewed the

perceiver as of higher status in terms of perceived attributes (e.g., competence, confidence). Some clear themes of the narratives included feeling pressure to perform in the future; feeling uncomfortable with the lack of truth; becoming motivated to fulfill the perceiver's expectation; and feeling good that one is perceived highly by an important other.

Some participants expressed discomfort with having someone believe untrue things about them specifically because they were untrue, even when those beliefs were positive. This is consistent with Swann's (Swann et al., 2003; Swann et al., 1992) self-verification theory. Contrary to the expectation in much of social psychology that people want to be viewed positively, support for self-verification theory shows that even more so, people want to be viewed accurately. People want to feel consistency and coherence between their self-views and feedback from others. They also want to be sure that future interactions will go smoothly, which may not happen if others hold false views of them or later find out how incompetent they really are (Swann et al., 2003). This theme of fear of later discovery was reported by many of our participants.

One contribution of the present study is that it documents the pervasiveness of impostor experiences. Most participants easily recalled experiencing an impostor episode. Thus, these do not seem to be unusual experiences or ones confined to certain highly-specific external situations. However, future research could profitably explore these feelings to an even deeper extent by focusing on diverse adult samples and on people going through role transitions. As Clance (1985) and Topping and Kimmel (1985) state, new jobs are a prime time to experience feelings of impostorism. To be a new college professor or a new doctor (or, as a minister friend told one of us, a new clergyperson) means to have your "clientele" looking at you as if you are a competent, accomplished actual member of that profession. The feelings one experiences in the new role, however, are unlikely to match that characterization. We expect that during these times of role transition, the affective experience of impostorism would be structurally the same as what we found here but more intense. Future work should also study IP experiences in other populations. Our college student sample described experiences typical in college and high school. Work with more diverse or older populations would likely yield more descriptions of IP episodes in employment settings.

As previously discussed, past research yielded data unresponsive of the IP as a stable personality attribute and questions the validity of IP scales. Should researchers conclude that the IP is not useful to study from a personality perspective? Not at all: Ample evidence indicates that those scoring high on IP scales experience myriad negative affective states (Henning, Ey, & Shaw, 1998; McElwee & Yurak, 2007), predict failure in future situations (Cozzarelli & Major, 1990), and hold themselves to perfectionistic standards (Henning et al., 1998; Kolligian & Sternberg, 1991; Thompson et al., 2000). The scales are valid in the sense that they differentiate effectively between people identified through other means such as clinical interviews as impostors or nonimpostors (Holmes, Kertay, Adamson, Holland, & Clance, 1993) and predict affective and cognitive reactions to hypothetical situations (Kolligian & Sternberg, 1990).

Thus, scales measuring the IP identify a group of people who appear to suffer from self-doubt and other aversive affective states. Furthermore, in the present study, higher scores on IP measures were associated with reporting a greater frequency of impostor

episodes and with greater negative affect during and while reflecting about an actual episode. However, future work on the IP as an individual difference variable should be careful to heed the findings of Leary et al. (2000) and McElwee and Yurak (2007) about the lack of a true belief in “impostors” that others see them positively and about the self-presentational aspects of impostorism (see also Ferrari and Thompson, 2006). Our summative view is that the scales can be used to identify people who report impostor feelings, but researchers should not assume that their underlying beliefs actually reflect the content of the statements they endorse on the scales. Researchers need to consider the possibility that respondents may be more concerned with self-deprecating self-presentation in order to lower expectations and provide an excuse for failure, in the (probably unlikely) event it were to occur.

This study represents a first step in a new approach to learning about the impostor phenomenon. It has been our experience that when we discuss our work on this topic informally, people readily understand the emotional experience we describe and spontaneously and animatedly recount stories of occasions they felt that way. Certainly this experience happens to people with a wide variety of personality attributes and is not limited to those who score high on IP scales. We encourage future research, especially research conducted with participants experiencing role transitions.

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