

# Feeling like a fraud

Christian Jarrett examines the psychology of the impostor phenomenon

Dr James Barry had a remarkable career. A pioneering military surgeon of the British army, he was stationed all over the world, including Saint Helena, where he attended briefly to Napoleon Bonaparte, and the Crimea, where he encountered Florence

Nightingale. It was only when Barry died that her womanhood was revealed. Barry had lived as an impostor – a woman masquerading as a man – probably as a way to follow a career closed to women. As Nightingale observed in *Cassandra*: ‘A woman cannot live in the light of intellect. Society forbids it.’

Fast forward 100 years to the 1970s and it was no longer so unusual for professional positions to be filled by women. Social progress, perhaps, but the weight of so many years of sexual discrimination wasn't easy to shrug off. Writing at the time, two clinical psychologists – Dr Pauline Clance and Dr Suzanne Imes – described interviews they'd conducted with 150 highly successful women who ‘despite their earned degrees, scholastic honours, high achievement...praise and professional recognition’ reported feeling no internal sense of success and considered themselves to be impostors. Clance and Imes christened this complex the ‘impostor phenomenon’ (IP).

Although not recognised as a formal psychiatric condition, the impostor idea has inspired numerous studies and, judging by its repeated appearance in the careers pages of prestigious publications, it continues to resonate powerfully. In 2009 *Nature* ran a career piece about the phenomenon, citing the example of two leading female scientists who still fear being found out. It followed a similar *Science* career article from 2008 entitled ‘No, you're not an impostor’.

Psychologists are particularly prone, according to Susan Pinker in her book *The Sexual Paradox*. She cites a 1984 study by Margaret Gibbs and colleagues of randomly selected American psychologists that found 69 per cent of them felt like impostors.

## The phenomenon

According to Clance and Imes' seminal paper, there are three defining features of impostorism. The first is a feeling that other people have an inflated perception of your abilities. Second is a fear that your true abilities will be found out, and third is a persistent tendency to attribute successes to external factors, such as luck or disproportionate effort. The condition is particularly likely to strike when a person starts a new job or takes on new responsibilities. Ironically, the feeling that one is a fraud can inspire greater effort and conscientiousness thus leading to more success and promotion, thereby triggering another round of impostor feelings.

Impostorism is related to and overlaps with several other manifestations of self-doubt including self-handicapping, in which an individual sabotages their own performance so as to provide a ready-made excuse for failure; and defensive pessimism, which involves taking extensive measures to try to avoid expected failure. In a survey of over 400 people, Shaun Cowman and Joseph Ferrari found that those who self-handicapped were also more likely to score high on a measure of the impostor phenomenon (see ‘Measuring impostorism’).

## The background

Clance and Imes's seminal paper appeared at the tail end of an era of United States social history recognised as the second wave of feminism. The so-called ‘Horner effect’, referring to women's apparent fear of success, had been introduced a decade earlier in an article for *Psychology Today* magazine. Matina Horner described how,

Dr James Barry (left) with her servant and her dog Psyche

## references

- Burton, S. (2000). *Impostors: Six kinds of liar*. London: Viking.
- Clance, P.R. (1985). *The impostor phenomenon*. Atlanta: Peachtree.
- Clance, P.R., Dingman, D., Reviere, S.L. & Stober, D.R. (1995). Impostor phenomenon in an interpersonal/social context: *Origins and treatment*. *Women and Therapy*, 16, 79–96.
- Clance, P.R. & Imes, S. (1978). The impostor phenomenon in high achieving women: Dynamics and therapeutic intervention. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*, 15, 241–247.
- Cowman, S.E. & Ferrari, J.R. (2002). ‘Am I for real?’ Predicting impostor tendencies from self-handicapping and affective components. *Social Behaviour and Personality*, 30, 119–125.
- Horner, M.S. (1968). *Sex differences in achievement motivation and performance in competitive and non-competitive situations*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Michigan.
- Horner, M.S. (1969). Fail: Bright women. *Psychology Today*, 62, 36–38.
- Kaplan, K. (2009). Unmasking the impostor. *Nature*, 459, 468–469.
- Laursen, L. (2008). No, you're not an impostor. *Science*, 15 February [http://bit.ly/3YeYE7].
- Leary, M.R., Orlando, A.E. & Funk, W.W. (2000). The impostor phenomenon: Self-perceptions, reflected appraisals, and interpersonal strategies. *Journal of Personality*, 68, 725–756.
- McElwee, R.O. & Yurak, T.J. (2007). Feeling versus acting like an impostor: Real feelings of fraudulence or self-presentation? *Individual Differences Research*, 5,

as part of her doctoral research, she'd asked male and female participants to write a story in response to the cue 'John (or Anne) finds herself at the top of her medical school class'. Horner reported higher rates of negative imagery in the stories written by women about Anne's success when compared with men's stories about John's success, and she concluded that this was evidence that women feared success.

It was around the time that Clance was working as lecturer and clinician at Oberlin College in Ohio, the first coeducational college in the United States, when she realised the feelings of impostorism she'd experienced as a student were common among her female students at Oberlin. 'I was very interested in and active in the Feminist movement at that time,' says Clance. 'At Oberlin I helped put on a conference on "brave new women" and there was a consciousness about the second-class citizenship of women, even at Oberlin. There were very few women faculty professors.'

'I noticed that my students were full of doubt about their abilities and worried about continuing their successes,' she says. 'For example, saying "I am afraid" and "this time I will blow the exam", yet when I asked them, they had never blown an exam. In fact, their SAT scores and grades were excellent. One of them said to me, "I feel like an impostor here with all these bright people".'

Clance compared observations with her colleague Suzanne Imes and the pair went on to interview dozens of women, professionals as well as students, about their experiences of the impostor phenomenon. These were women who

had achieved success but found it uncomfortable, fearing that they'd arrived there by mistake or through luck. 'At first we wrote the article thinking it was mainly women who were affected by IP, because at that time, although I was seeing equal numbers of men and women in the counselling centre, it was women who would bring this issue up far more,' says Clance. 'However, later on when I started talking widely about IP, the male faculty would often say they'd experienced it, and yet I don't think it was affecting them as much.'

Today the condition has lost many of its feminist undertones and subsequent research has suggested that men can be as prone or even more prone to impostor

feelings as women. In a 1985 survey of academics, for example, Mary Topping and Ellen Kimmel reported higher scores of impostorism among male staff compared with females. 'I've certainly seen men who have experienced IP,' Clance says. 'For example, I saw a man in the corporate world who'd come in for relationship problems, but what came out was that he had a tremendous fear of failure in almost every area; a tremendous fear of somehow not looking or being competent. He wanted to be totally liked, even by the cab driver.'

Although the social climate has evolved since the early accounts of the impostor phenomenon, Dr Valerie Young, another self-confessed sufferer of the

## Measuring impostorism

**The Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (CIPS) was published in Pauline Clance's book in 1985 and continues to be the scale of choice for many researchers investigating IP. The scale consists of 20 items, scored from one to five (from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'), and factor analyses suggest that it comprises three subscales: Fake, Discount and Luck, which tap into the different components of IP.**

**The Fake subscale (e.g. 'I'm afraid people important to me may find out that I am not as capable as they think I am') measures feelings of incompetence and belief in other people's inflated perceptions. The Discount subscale (e.g. 'If I receive a great deal of praise and recognition for something I've accomplished, I tend to discount the importance of what I have done') measures the tendency to ignore objective evidence and praise for one's ability. And finally, the Luck subscale (e.g. 'At times, I feel my success has been due to some kind of luck') measures the tendency to externalise the reasons for one's success, in terms of luck or circumstance.**

**Other measures of impostorism have also been developed. Mark Leary and colleagues, who presented evidence in 2000 that IP is a self-presentational strategy, formulated their own seven-item scale focused on the fraudulent component of IP. Example items include 'I tend to feel like a phony' and 'Sometimes I am afraid that I will be discovered for who I really am'.**

201–220.

McElwee, R.O. & Yurak, T.J. (in press).

The phenomenology of the impostor phenomenon. *Individual Differences Research*.

Oleson, K.C., Poehlmann, K.M., Yost, J.H., et al (2000). Subjective overachievement: Individual differences in self-doubt and concern with performance. *Journal of Personality*, 68, 491–524.

Pinker, S. (2008). *The sexual paradox*. New York: Scribner.

Sonnak, C. & Towell, T. (2001). The impostor phenomenon in British university students: Relationships between self-esteem, mental health, parental rearing style and socioeconomic status. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 31, 863–874.

Swann, W.B., Stein-Seroussi, A. & Giesler, R.B. (1992). Why people self-verify.

*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 62, 392–401.

Topping, M.E. & Kimmel, E.B. (1985). The impostor phenomenon: Feeling phony. *Academic Psychology Bulletin*, 7, 213–226.

Want, J. & Kleitman, S. (2006). Imposter phenomenon and self-handicapping: Links with parenting styles and self-confidence. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 40, 961–971.

phenomenon, says IP remains as relevant as ever. She's the founder of [www.impostorsyndrome.com](http://www.impostorsyndrome.com) and runs workshops on impostorism in the United States for major organisations like Boeing and Harvard University. 'Yes, things have changed for younger women, but there are at least 10 other groups that are particularly susceptible to these feelings,' she says. 'While an undergraduate majoring in English literature or art may not feel like a fraud, once she (or he) gets to graduate school these feelings can emerge due to the culture. Similarly, attending school or working in another country, being a first-generation professional, or being one of the first or the few in a field are all experiences that do not change with the era.'

### Possible causes

In the mid-1990s Clance and her colleagues argued that the impostor phenomenon can be fostered in a child by parents who selectively value certain aspects of that child, such as her attractiveness and sociability, whilst undervaluing others, such as her intelligence. The idea is that the child raised this way builds a self-concept around the characteristics valued by her parents and later resists attributing her successes to virtues (such as high intelligence) that don't fit with this parentally defined self-concept. Clance's team further argued that, for women, societal expectations about gender roles can exacerbate the situation. By this account, a woman might see her career success as a consequence not of her intellect but of her ability to charm, so as to conform to her self-concept and to be consistent with cultural norms surrounding femininity.

These ideas have found support in recent research findings. In a survey of British university students, for example, Carina Sonnak and Tony Towell found that students who said their parents were more controlling and protective also tended to score higher on a measure of impostorism. Similarly, a 2006 survey in Australia by Julie Want and Sabina Kleitman of a broad range of professionals, from doctors to small business owners, found that higher scores on an impostor scale were associated with reports of an overprotective father – an association that was offset if the father was also seen as providing emotional warmth.

'We can only speculate at this stage,' says Kleitman, 'but it's probable that a

### Higher scores on an impostor scale were associated with reports of an overprotective father

warm and responsive parent would foster an experience-rich environment that encourages self-exploration, where parental feedback (either positive or negative) would be interpreted as being helpful and non-threatening for the formation of healthy self-beliefs. In contrast, an overprotective parent limits the types of experiences that their child is allowed to engage in, as well as encourages their child to reflect on them in a less positive way. In other words, the child of an overprotective and critical parent may attribute his or her success to parental involvement or chance, rather than to their own achievements resulting from their own talents and efforts.'

### Feigning fraudulence

Whilst the onward march of the impostor phenomenon shows no signs of stopping, two little-known articles published in the last decade have challenged key aspects of the impostor construct. They suggest the complex may be construed more accurately as a presentational strategy – a way for a person to downplay expectations and feign modesty.

The first of these articles was published by Mark Leary and colleagues at Wake Forest University in 2000. They saw the impostor phenomenon as something of an enigma: most of us have inflated views of our own abilities and like to create the best possible impression, so why should these ubiquitous human

traits be missing in people with IP? However, the mystery weakened when they showed that people with the impostor phenomenon could, in effect, merely be pretending to be impostors.

An initial experiment showed that although high scorers on an impostor scale rated themselves poorly (as you'd expect) on factors like intelligence and appearance, they also said they thought other people would rate them equally poorly. This appears to undermine one of the cardinal tenets of the impostor complex – the fraudulent aspect – which refers to the impostor's belief that other people rate their abilities too highly.

Two subsequent experiments also seemed to further undermine the impostor phenomenon, at least as identified using questionnaires. Leary's team found that high scorers on impostorism behaved as you'd expect when they thought their opinions were public, but behaved rather differently when they thought their opinions were private. For example, asked in public, high scorers on an impostorism scale predicted that they would do poorly on a fictional psychology test invented by the researchers, but when asked in private, their performance expectations matched those of participants who scored low in impostorism.

Rory McElwee and Tricia Yurak at Rowan University built on these findings with a study of their own published in 2007. They replicated Leary's finding that

the majority of impostors (defined by their high score on an impostor scale) thought other people would rate them as lowly as they rated themselves. By splitting their sample, McElwee and Yurak further showed that the few 'true' impostors (who did predict others would rate them too high) and the remaining 'strategic' impostors were equally concerned with self-presentation. 'If true impostors did not use self-presentational strategies as much as strategic impostors did, this would have been consistent with the notion that true impostors are more reliably expressing their actual feelings,' McElwee explains. 'As the results showed, however, true versus strategic impostors did not reliably differ on self-presentation strategies.'

### A state rather than a trait?

So do these new findings mean there is no such thing as an impostor phenomenon? Valerie Young doesn't think so. She's always believed that there are two sides to the impostor story. 'There is a little voice in all of us that, however small and weak, believes we are smart, that we can do it,' she says. 'It's just that when we know that our work – and therefore "we" – will be judged, we start to second guess ourselves and our louder and more insistent impostor voice drowns out any semblance of self-assurance. "Maybe I'm really not that smart... maybe I really won't do that well." Whether it's a face-saving strategy or second guessing, I've worked with enough people who are truly suffering from the impostor syndrome to know they are not just "pretending" to feel like frauds.'

Clance agrees. 'People with IP do want to be smart, to look smart, and they sometimes feel as if they are,' she says. 'It's not that the impostor feelings are there all the time. In terms of self-presentation, the biggest disagreement I have [with these new findings] is that I don't think they're probably looking at the continuum of feelings. In my work, if people score above 60, then they're having the kind of feelings that can interfere with them, for example, taking a promotion or going after something that they have the skill set to do, but they're afraid they can't.'

'The other thing,' Clance adds, 'is that these self-presentation papers don't look at whether their participants really are successful. In all my early work, we used outside criteria to be sure that the person was really able and competent.'

McElwee agrees that there's little doubt some people do sometimes feel like a fraud. Her specific concerns are with what the impostor scales are really measuring and with the idea that the impostor phenomenon is a trait, when in reality it might be better construed as a state. 'I think they [the impostor scales] are measuring a combination of low self-esteem, negative affect, and a desire to lower others' expectations for the self,' she says. 'I do not think they validly measure actual impostor feelings, or at least they do not measure such feelings purely enough to be of any use for identifying so-called impostors – and that is the case not only because of the scale but also because I think the whole concept of this as a personality variable is flawed.'

### Helping people with impostorism

State or trait, and whether there is a self-presentational component to impostorism or not, all the experts appear to agree that people do sometimes experience irrational feelings of incompetence, and that this is an unpleasant state, which in the worst situations can lead to lost opportunities. So what is the latest advice on how to overcome these feelings?

Young's top three tips for helping other people with IP are: 'normalise the feeling – there are ten perfectly good reasons why someone should feel like a fraud,' she says; 'help clients understand their attitudes toward/ definitions of competence and failure, and help them to shift these; and explore other reasons they might be ambivalent about success – what often feels like fear and self-doubt is in fact, an awareness of the other side of success.'

Clance says that for some people, just finding out that the phenomenon exists and that other people have these fears, is beneficial. 'Reading about it, hearing about it, talking about, especially

## What does impostorism feel like?

**Common sense suggests that believing other people hold positive beliefs about you ought to be a rewarding feeling. But there's a body of research on self-verification, much of it conducted by William Swann, that shows it is more important to people to feel they have been accurately perceived than to be perceived positively. This is consonant with a recent investigation into what it feels like to have impostor feelings – to feel as though another person has an inflated view of your abilities. Rory McElwee and Tricia Yurak asked 122 student participants to recall a time in their past when they'd been in a situation in which they believed another person had an exaggerated view of their abilities. In their descriptions of these situations, the students listed a combined total of 46 affective responses, 41 of which were negative, including feeling anxious, embarrassed, under pressure and worried about failure. Moreover, all the students reported wanting to correct the misapprehension, 24 per cent of them 'quite a lot' or 'extremely'. Students who scored higher on impostor phenomenon scales tended to report finding the remembered situation more distressing and to feel more distressed by recalling it, and they also tended to express a stronger desire to correct the misapprehension. 'Intuition might suggest that being viewed positively by others would always be desirable and satisfying,' McElwee and Yurak write. 'However, our data showed instead that negative affect is a common reaction to feeling one's abilities are being overestimated.'**

at workshops with other people experiencing IP, helps them begin to identify the symptoms.' Clance adds that in her self-help book, published in the 1980s, she talks about beginning to notice what happens when you receive praise; the way that people with high IP tend to compare their weaknesses with other people's strengths, and how they'll look at things they've had difficulty with, compare with other people and assume that they've done it with ease, when really they can't know that – the other person might be struggling just as much as them or more. 'Anyone who'd like to use my material to run a workshop, I'm happy for them to do that. I want them to work with it,' she says, her passion for IP still evident three decades after that influential paper.

**I Dr Christian Jarrett is *The Psychologist's* staff journalist  
chrber@bps.org.uk**

"just finding out that the phenomenon exists and that other people have these fears, is beneficial"