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Understanding Imposter Syndrome: A Correlational Analysis Of Achievement Motivation, Parental Bonding, And Perceived Social Support

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ABSTRACT

lance and Imes (1978) coined the term "Imposter Phenomenon" (IP) to describe the persistent feelings of self-doubt experienced by individuals despite their achievements, a phenomenon often observed in high-achieving individuals. This study investigates the relationships between Imposter Phenomenon (IP), Achievement Motivation, Parental Bonding, and Perceived Social Support in a sample of 251 individuals (108 males and 143 females) from India. Using Pearson correlations, the study explores how these factors relate to each other and what implications they have for understanding imposter syndrome. The results show a significant positive correlation between Imposter Phenomenon and Achievement Motivation ($r = 0.549$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that individuals with higher achievement motivation are more likely to experience imposter syndrome. This suggests that high-achieving environments may contribute to feelings of self-doubt and fraudulence. Parental bonding and imposter syndrome do not significantly correlate ($r = -0.017$), suggesting that parental interactions may not play a substantial role in imposter syndrome. Similarly, the correlation between the imposter phenomenon and perceived social support is weak and non-significant ($r = - 0.105$), indicating that social support may not have a major effect on imposter syndrome. Future research should delve deeper into other underlying causes of the imposter phenomenon, such as personal, cultural, and organizational factors. Understanding the root causes can help in developing more effective strategies and interventions to reduce the impact of imposter syndrome, especially in high-achieving environments.

Keywords: imposter syndrome, parental bonding, achievement motivation, perceived social support

Introduction

The term "Imposter Phenomenon" (IP), also known as Imposter Syndrome, refers to the emotions experienced by individuals who have reached a certain level of accomplishment but do not believe they deserve it. It was first described by psychologists Suzanne Imes, PhD, and Pauline Rose Clance, PhD, in the 1970s (Clance & Imes, 1978). They initially observed this phenomenon among high-achieving women, but later recognized its prevalence across genders, professions, and demographic groups. Individuals who experience IP often feel that they are not capable in their jobs or believe that their accomplishments were due to external factors such as luck, a fluke, knowing the right person, or personal charm, rather than their skills (Clance & Imes, 1978). This results in individuals fearing they might be exposed as a "fraud." Despite being widespread and causing anxiety and depression, Imposter Syndrome is not classified as a psychological disorder in the DSM.

Imposter Syndrome and High Achievement Motivation

Studies indicate a direct relationship between the need for high achievement and imposter syndrome in individuals (Singh, 2019). Imposter syndrome is more commonly seen in high-achieving fields like science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields among faculty, post-doctorate researchers, and PhD individuals, which could be due to peer comparisons, faculty evaluations, public recognition, anticipatory fear of not knowing, and perceived lack of competency (Chakraverty, 2022). Although individuals suffering from imposter syndrome are highly driven, they secretly worry that others will eventually find out that they lack

certain skills and information (Jöstl et al., 2012). However, few studies suggest that university students with high IP scores and those with low IP scores exhibit similar academic results (Gibson-Beverly & Schwartz, 2008; Yaffe, 2021). These findings suggest that feelings of IP are not limited to underachievers.
Nevertheless, university students with high IP scores are less likely to have high hopes for future accomplishments and are more likely to suffer from academic test anxiety (Cusack et al., 2013; Ross et al., 2001). Excessive pressure to meet high self-imposed standards also increases the likelihood of experiencing IP (Thompson et al., 2000). Although individuals with IP are unable to internalize their accomplishments, they may have high standards for achievement or may feel significant pressure from important individuals to achieve, leading to a persistent fear of failure (Moussa et al., 2024; Iyer et al., 2024; Jaafari et al., 2023; Gilani et al., 2023; Tantry & Singh, 2016). Thus, imposter syndrome is prevalent among high achievers. Additionally, individuals with IP are likely to have low hope for success in their achievements and may experience a high fear of failure in their tasks.

Imposter Syndrome and Parental Bonding

Four early family factors contribute to the development of IP, which include: a) learning early that being smart is the family's foremost command, b) having interests or achievements different from those of family members, c) receiving feedback or praise from the family that does not match the feedback from other sources, and d) receiving little praise from parents (Gernal et al., 2024; Khan et al., 2023; Tantry & Ali, 2020; Greenberg, 2019; Majeed, 2018a, 2018b; Tantry & Singh, 2017). Imposter syndrome is negatively correlated with family cohesion and expressiveness and positively correlated with family conflict and family control on the family environment scale. However, the correlation between these variables is not strong (Bussotti, 1990). Imposter syndrome in adolescents and adults has been linked to several marital conditions, such as maladaptive parenting, alcoholism in the home, and specific parenting approaches (Caseiman, Seif & Self, 2006; Castro, Jones & Mirsalimi, 2004; Cusack et al., 2013; Robinson & Goodpaster, 1991). Another study reveals that perceived parental overprotection and carelessness are weakly correlated with imposter syndrome among British students (Sonak & Towell, 2001). Parental care and overprotection influence self-esteem, thereby affecting the experience of imposter syndrome in individuals (Yaffe, 2020). Overall, there has been minimal and inconsistent empirical study on the relationship between parenting styles and imposter syndrome, and the correlation between them is weak.

Imposter Syndrome and Perceived Social Support

Social support is essential for coping with feelings of imposter syndrome (Snipes, 2023). Social support refers to the perception of receiving affection, support, and care from other group members (Cobb, 1976). Studies suggest that significant others in a group may provide perceived social support that serves as a psychological buffer in stressful situations (Bhagat et al., 2012; Sia et al., 2013). This helps individuals maintain appropriate psychological functioning and promotes mental health (Bolger & Amarel, 2007; Sia & Bhardwaj, 2008). When not effectively supported, it can also serve as a maladaptive coping mechanism (Sorour et al., 2024; Al Jaghoub et al., 2024; Mainali & Tantry, 2022; Nivetha & Majeed, 2022; Tantry & Singh, 2018).
Research suggests that emotional and social support from friends and significant others is crucial for managing feelings and thoughts associated with imposter experiences (Hutchins et al., 2019). However, some studies indicate that the relationship between social support and imposter syndrome is not significant (Pervez et al., 2021).

Hypotheses

1. There is a positive correlation between Imposter Phenomenon and Achievement Motivation.
2. There is a negative correlation between Imposter Phenomenon and Parental Bonding.
3. There is a negative correlation between Imposter Phenomenon and Perceived Social Support.

Research Methodology

Research Design

Pearson's Correlation is employed to examine the relationship between imposter phenomenon and other variables, including achievement motivation, parental bonding, and perceived social support.

Participants

The study involved 261 individuals of both genders from diverse backgrounds, including undergraduate, post-graduate, PhD students, and working professionals in India. After excluding outliers, 251 participants were selected for the study, comprising 108 males and 143 females. A convenient sampling method was used.

Materials

Imposter Phenomenon

The participants' imposter feelings were measured using the Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (CIPS; Clance, 1985), a 20-item measure evaluating feelings of being a fake, fear of failing despite past achievements, and the belief that luck plays a role in success. It uses a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (not at all true) to 5 (extremely true), with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.96.

Achievement Motivation

A reduced version of the Achievement Motivation Scale (Lang & Fries, 2006) was used, consisting of 10 items measuring "hope of success" (approach tendency) and "fear of failure" (avoidance tendency).

Parental Bonding

The Parental Bonding Instrument (Parker et al., 1979), modified to 12 items, measures parental bonding with two subscales: care and overprotection. The scale uses a 4-point Likert-type scale.

Perceived Social Support

The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet et al., 1988) was used to measure perceived social support, with subscales for relationships with family, friends, and significant others.

Procedure

Participants were invited to take part voluntarily and provided informed consent. A Google survey was administered, containing the scales mentioned above along with demographic questions. The procedure took about 15-20 minutes, and participants were assured of confidentiality.

Data Analysis

IBM SPSS version 26 and Excel were used for descriptive analysis and correlations.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive Statistics

- **Imposter Syndrome**: Mean = 62.27, SD = 14.880
- **Achievement Motivation**: Mean = 36.69, SD = 5.139
- **Parental Bonding**: Mean = 29.35, SD = 3.869
- **Perceived Social Support**: Mean = 15.6454, SD = 3.496

Discussion

The findings confirm the first hypothesis that imposter phenomenon is positively correlated with achievement motivation. This suggests that individuals driven by a high achievement need are more likely to experience imposter feelings despite their accomplishments. However, contrary to our expectations, parental bonding and perceived social support did not show significant negative correlations with imposter syndrome. This indicates that factors such as the individual's drive for achievement may play a larger role in the development of imposter syndrome than early parental interactions or social support. Further research should explore additional cultural, organizational, and personal factors contributing to imposter syndrome.

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Table1*DescriptiveStatistics*

DescriptiveStatistics

N		Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std.Deviation
TotalIPScore	251	19	100	62.27	14.880
TotalAchievementMotivation	251	18	50	36.69	5.139
TotalParentingBondingScale	251	18	40	29.35	3.869
TotalPerceivedSocialSupportscores	251	5.00	21.00	15.6454	3.49632
ValidN(listwise)	251				

Table2*Correlationbetweenimpostorphenomenon,achievementmotivation,parentingbondingand perceived social support*

Correlations

TotalIP Score			TotalAchievement Motivation	TotalParenting Bonding Scale	Total Perceived Social Support scores
TotalIP Score	PearsonCorrelation	1	.549**	-.017	-.105
	Sig.(2-tailed)		.000	.784	.098
	N	251	251	251	251
TotalAchievement Motivation	PearsonCorrelation	.549**	1	.015	-.120
	Sig.(2-tailed)	.000		.810	.057
	N	251	251	251	251
TotalParenting Bonding Scale	PearsonCorrelation	-.017	.015	1	.151*
	Sig.(2-tailed)	.784	.810		.016
	N	251	251	251	251
TotalPerceivedSocial Support scores	PearsonCorrelation	-.105	-.120	.151*	1
	Sig.(2-tailed)	.098	.057	.016	
	N	251	251	251	251

**.Correlationissignificantatthe0.01level(2-tailed).

*.Correlationissignificantatthe0.05level(2-tailed).