

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY  
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IMPOSTER PHENOMENON IN FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

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## Abstract

In 1978, the term Imposter Phenomenon (IP) was defined and studied by Clance and Imes. They studied why women tend to experience the imposter phenomenon more than men. Imposter phenomenon refers to a feeling of phoniness experienced at an internal level by competent people (Clance, 1985). College students have been a secondary source of research populations in more modern years. Previous research has shown some characteristics of imposter phenomenon and illustrated comparisons between genders and ethnicities, but has not shown the percentages of college students who have the phenomenon. The study examined the imposter phenomenon among first-generation college students to better understand the rate of attrition among first-generation students that is an increasing problem (Martinez, 2009). Results show that there is no overall difference between first-generation and non-first-generation students. However, there was a significant difference between white first-generation and white non-first-generation students; white first-generation students displayed much higher levels of imposterism than white non-first-generation students.

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## Chapter 1

### Literature Review

In 1978, Clance and Imes became one of the first teams to analyze a psychological condition known as imposter phenomenon. Imposter phenomenon is the experience of an internal phoniness concerning one's intellectual ability (Clance, 1985). This “experience of intellectual phoniness” has been found in many high achieving individuals in varied fields (Clance and Imes, 1978; Cozzarelli & Major, 1990). Imposter phenomenon is when an intelligent and capable person believes they are average and less capable than they are. This feeling is accompanied by a fear of being “found out” as a fake by peers or others around them. These individuals do not believe they are truly intelligent or creative (King & Cooley, 1995).

Individuals often have an extreme sense of worry the achievements they earn are unwarranted and this will cause them to be found as a fraud (Clance, 1985; Sakulku & Alexander, 2011). This belief, that they fool those around them even when there are multiple, compelling reasons to justify an accomplishment (usually in a professional or academic capacity), is an indication of the phenomenon (Stahl, Turner, Wheeler, and Elbert, 1980; Topping & Kimmel, 1985). Those with imposter phenomenon truly feel as though they are less intelligent posers in a group of extremely bright people. Most often, these individuals express they have somehow deceived others and snuck into well-known or intelligent places such as professional jobs or even simply earning a degree which they do not believe they truly deserve.

Clance and Imes (1978) and Clance and O'Toole (1987) studied imposter phenomenon in women who have degrees in professional fields. In their research, Clance, Dingman, Reviere, & Stober (1995) noted that the individual:

May not achieve...full potential, at times even refusing opportunities to advance; [the individual] has difficulty enjoying success and, to the contrary, may feel haunted by that success; [the individual] does not have a realistic sense of [his/her] own competence; and is not fully empowered to internalize and manifest [his/her] strengths, allow deficits, and fully pursue and experience fulfillment. (82)

However, Chrisman, Pieper, Clance, Holland, & Glickauf-Hughes (1995) showed that the imposter phenomenon, while more pronounced and more often found in women, can also be found in men. This finding was further supported by the studies of McGregor, Gee & Posey (2008) and King & Cooley (1995) and others even though research suggests that the imposter phenomenon is more prevalent among women. Imposters, male or female, often give multiple external explanations for the success that they achieve (McGregor et al., 2008). These explanations often include coincidence, knowing the right person, luck, or even attractiveness (Clance et al., 1995; Li, Hughes, & Thu, 2014; McGregor et al., 2008). When experiencing an outcome that was less than ideal, imposters often downplay their work or claim they did not try (Cozzarelli & Major, 1990).

Imposters are unable to appreciate their success and experience low self-efficacy (Langford & Clance, 1993). Self-efficacy is generally defined as how well a person thinks they can do something or their own perceived capabilities (Bandura, 1977). Imposters cannot internalize an actual sense of being competent, creative, able, intelligent, or good at what they do. Instead they give false external excuses for any praise they may receive. Due to this inability

to accept positive reinforcement, they may experience intense pressure to live up to their own expectations and this can lead to feelings of depression and anxiety (Langford & Clance, 1993).

One example of this diminished sense of self-efficacy comes from a study performed by Cozzarelli and Major (1990). Students in college classrooms were given self-report surveys before and after an exam grade was given. The exam scores they earned were then compared to the self-reported expectations of grades. This helped to find high-achieving students and low-achieving students (through their exam grades) as well as the perception each student had about their confidence before and after the test. They found imposters may claim to have studied very little after receiving a failing grade, but those not identified as imposters claimed to have studied and prepared more. However, when the individuals were successful, imposters, in the success condition, could not be differentiated in terms of self-confidence or self-doubt from non-imposters. Both imposters and non-imposters claimed they had either studied for long periods of time or that they were simply lucky. Upon a successful or desired outcome, the imposter believes the anxiety, stress, excessive worry, and self-doubt that may manifest are essential and fairly normal in order to achieve this positive outcome (Clance et al., 1995; Cozzarelli & Major, 1990). Cozzarelli and Major (1990) also noted-imposters cannot internalize their success and, upon review of their work, they cannot accept praise, but will rather focus on the pieces of their work which were not perfect (McIntosh, 1985).

This lack of positive internal thought causes imposters to repeat one of two patterns with every new challenge they face. The imposter will either begin to work immediately, over-preparing and working to perfect the task, or they will procrastinate until the last minute when they will fly into a state of rushed and anxiety-ridden activity (Clance et al., 1995). If the imposter over-prepares, they may internalize they must work harder than everyone else in order



to meet the same standard as everyone else. If they procrastinate, they will tell themselves they did a good job of fooling others, again being an imposter.

As the outcome of any performance of intelligence or skill is revealed, this cycle experienced by the imposters continues whether the performance was successful or not. If the individual is not successful, they believe they simply faked being intelligent and will continue to try and “fool” those around them because they believe they are not smart. If the individual succeeds, they will believe their suffering is essential to their success and will continue over-preparing (Clance and O’Toole, 1987). Whichever outcome, doubting is reinforced and the imposter will continue having feelings of being a fraud.

These feelings of being a fraud can also be experienced by first-generation students. Research has shown this group of college students also experiences other characteristics of the imposter phenomenon as well (Choy, 2001; Hottinger, 2006; Martinez, Sher, Krull, and Wood, 2009; Moore, 2014; Terenzini, 1996). Because of these common characteristics between imposters and first generation students, the present study focused on a comparison of the imposter phenomenon in first-generation students and to non-first-generation students.

For example, first-generation students, as opposed to non-first-generation students, tend to exhibit lower levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy (Hottinger, 2006). Similar to the characteristics of individuals with the imposter phenomenon, this reluctance to experience an internal sense of accomplishment is something first-generation students exhibit as well. First-generation students are often reluctant to admit success and intelligence because of their feelings of unpreparedness. They can also be reluctant to reveal their interpersonal abilities as shown by Hayes (1993). Hayes (1993) studied the occurrence of imposter phenomenon and type A personality (individuals who tend to be “work-oriented, competitive, impatient, hostile, and

determined to achieve as much as possible”) in a population of college students. Because these students were imposters and felt they were frauds, they were less likely to report having the communication, listening, and other skills that non-imposter students had (Hayes, 1993).

Compared to non-first-generation students, first-generation students are often more unprepared for college. Things such as knowing where the bursar's office is, how to fill out scholarships, how to find tutoring or academic help, or even just learning a professor's demeanor may cause a challenge. This unpreparedness for the academic world is just one contributing factor to explain why first-generation students may be less psychologically well-prepared for college. The many practical steps that have to be navigated and features of transitioning to college may cause stress and other emotional reactions for which first-generation students are not prepared. They must quickly adapt to a new environment and this need to acclimate at such a quick pace may cause social and academic challenges their non-first generation peers do not face (Hottinger, 2006). They often must navigate the new world of college alone or with the help of peers and faculty because their families do not have any experience with this life transition. Non-first-generation students have more advantages in transitioning to college as compared to first-generation students because they can discuss these challenges with their parents or other family members who have had similar experiences. Not only are first-generation students less well-prepared psychologically, but they also feel academically less well-prepared. Self-reports show first-generation students generally feel less prepared for college in terms of academics than their non-first-generation peers. This can contribute to low self-efficacy in the academic domain which can have the consequence of lower exam scores and, eventually, higher attrition rates (Hottinger, 2006).

In addition to worrying about their grades, as mentioned above, first-generation students often must balance a job with their college careers. Different attributes of first-generation students, such as the need to work while in college, cause characteristics that show a fairly large overlap between first-generation college students and imposter phenomenon. Hottinger and Rose (2006) suspect it is to counter destitution that first-generation students often hold jobs while in college. This causes less time to be available for studying or other college-related activities such as student extracurricular activities. This may also perpetuate the “stigma attached to being a first-generation college student” by those outside of the academic world and lead to a resentment of the title and status of being a college student (Hottinger, 2006). This may happen because of their status outside of the college community and being seen as “too good” by the community in which they grew up, being seen as “escaping” from their previous community, or other factors causing a loss of relationship with their life before college (Hottinger, 2006).

First-generation students face this fear of being ostracized because of their academic pursuits. The confidence of first-generation students may also diminish and contribute to less success, more stress, and overall feelings of fraudulence when dealing with the challenges of transitioning to college. Similarly, those with imposter phenomenon fear they will be found as fake by their peers. This connection between first-generation students and imposter phenomenon is important to study so that information regarding imposter phenomenon and its contributing role in the high attrition rates among first-generation college students may be better understood. Linking imposter phenomenon and first-generation status may help suggest possible actions to lessen the impact of imposter phenomenon on the rising attrition rate in college. College attrition (reduction of enrolled students) has the possibility of affecting “social mobility and economic success” (Martinez et al., 2009). This subject is of increasing importance to administrators at

universities and has become a serious issue (Hottinger, 2006). First-generation students, in particular, are at greater risk than their non-first-generation peers for attrition because of a multitude of reasons such as low self-efficacy, low parental involvement, and higher monetary risk (Hottinger, 2006). Both Hottinger (2006) and Martinez (2009) suggest the interpersonal issues such as self-esteem may have the largest impact on first-generation students. This occurrence of low self-esteem is noticeable in imposters as well (Chrisman, 1995, Cozzarelli & Major, 1990).

The following study will examine the relation between imposter phenomenon and first-generation status in order to better understand the higher rate of attrition among first-generation students. With this research, we propose the following: first-generation students will report higher levels of imposter phenomenon than non-first-generation students..

## **Chapter 2**

### **Method**

Two hundred and three undergraduates (126 females, 77 males) completed a survey to receive course credit for research participation. Representative of the average college population, the sample was comprised of 52.2% white, 12.3% black, 10.8% Hispanic, and 24.6% Asian students. The average age of the participants was 20 years (SD=2.84).

### **Materials and Measures**

The Clance Impostor Scale (Clance, 1985) was used to measure levels of imposter phenomenon. The Clance Impostor Scale has been verified by multiple studies including Holmes, Kertay, Adamson, Holland, & Clance, (1993) and found to be more reliable than other imposter phenomenon reporting scales. Pauline Clance's (1985) Clance Impostor Scale consists of 20 statements to measure feelings of the participants such as "I feel bad and discouraged if I'm not "the best" or at least "very special" in situations that involve achievement". Each statement describes a situation and the related feelings of that situation. The scale requires participants to rate statements on a 5-point scale ranging from "1 (not at all true)" to "5 (very true)". Higher scores represent a higher level of imposter phenomenon.

## **Procedures**

Participants completed the Clance Impostor Scale and a brief demographic questionnaire as part of a larger research survey containing other measures unrelated to this project.

## Chapter 3

### Results

We conducted an independent samples t-test to compare first-generation college students and non-first-generation on the imposter scale total score. This revealed no significant differences between the first-generation ( $M=62.50$ ,  $SD=12.11$ ) and the non-first-generation groups ( $M=31.20$ ,  $SD=14.16$ ;  $t(199)=0.54$ ,  $p=0.59$ ). Thus, our initial hypothesis was not supported.

Secondary exploratory analyses were conducted to examine possible other relationships among first-generation and non-first-generation students and the imposter phenomenon. We conducted two separate 2 x 2 between subjects ANOVAs: one with the independent variable participant sex (male, female) and the other with independent variable participant race (white, non-white), and including the independent variable of first-generation status (yes, no) in both tests. For both tests the dependent variables were levels of imposter phenomenon. The analysis with sex and first-generation status revealed no significant main effects or interactions between the variables.

The second 2 x 2 between subjects ANOVA comparing race and first-generation status was conducted because race has become an avenue of exploration in modern research concerning imposter phenomenon (Cokley, McClain, Enciso, and Martinez, 2013; Ewing, Richardson, James-Myers, and Russell, 1996; Peteet, Montgomery, and Weekes, 2015; Trotman, 2009). Because of the low frequency of each specific minority race, we created a dummy code for white (0) and non-white (1) participants to provide sufficient ability to test the effects of imposter

phenomenon. For the 2 race x 2 first-generation status ANOVA, we found no significant main effects, but we did find a significant interaction between the two factors,  $F(1,197)=5.22$ ,  $p=.023$ . White first-generation students ( $M=67.47$ ,  $SE=3.13$ ) and white non-first-generation students ( $M=60.38$ ,  $SE=1.47$ ) differed significantly ( $p=0.04$ ), suggesting higher levels of imposter phenomenon in white first-generation students than white non-first-generation students. Among non-white participants, no differences emerged between student status ( $p=.25$ ; see Table 1).

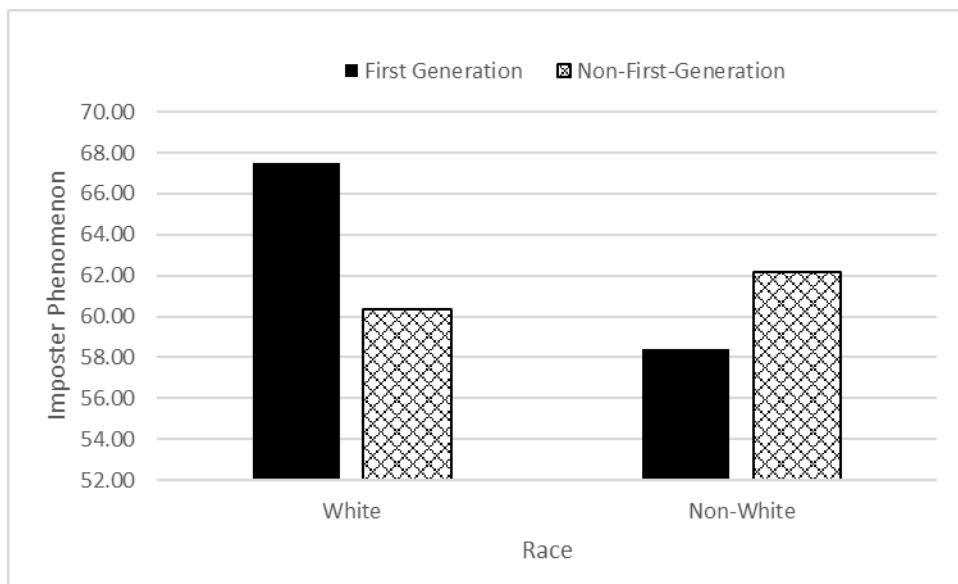


Table 1. Imposter Phenomenon in White and Non-White First-Generation College Students



## **Chapter 4**

### **Discussion**

The hypothesis that first-generation students would report higher levels of imposter phenomenon characteristics than non-first-generation students was not supported. This may be because of the amazing balancing act most first-generation students must perform in order to stay in college. Earlier it was mentioned that students often have to worry about balancing their academic career with jobs. While this may lead to less time devoted to academic studies, it may also prove those students are able to effectively navigate college and may diminish feelings of imposter phenomenon. Another reason may be that non-first-generation students also have fairly high levels of imposter phenomenon as they may not seek out the help of peers or faculty to help them adapt to the new college experience because of their availability of family who has participated in this transition and college culture as well.

Exploratory analyses were conducted to examine possible other relationships among first-generation and non-first-generation students and the imposter phenomenon. Examining sex and race differences among first-generation and non-first-generation students and the imposter phenomenon, we found sex was not a contributing factor; however, within race there was a significant difference between white and non-white students on the imposter phenomenon when comparing first-generation and non-first-generation. White first-generation students exhibited higher levels of imposter phenomenon than white non-first generation students. For non-white students, there was no significant difference between first-generation and non-first-generation

students. Exploratory analysis, however, provided surprising results indicating that imposter phenomenon is higher only for first-generation students who identify as white.

One possible explanation for the high-levels of imposter phenomenon among white first-generation students is the “black sheep effect.” The black sheep effect is the phenomenon where ingroup members are judged more extremely than outgroup members, regardless of positive or negative evaluations (Marques, Yzerbyt, and Leyens, 1988). These students may be fearful of judgement from ingroup members when underperforming. If these students feel they are underperforming relative to other first-generation students, their imposter phenomenon levels would increase due to fear of rejection from other ingroup members. This may have been an unforeseen limitation to the current study and should be taken into consideration for future research.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Another limitation of this study was the small sample size. This may have biased the data because it was collected from just over 200 students, only 46 of which identified as first-generation (21%). This may have caused a significant loss of power to detect a relatively small difference between first-generation and non-first-generation students. Another limitation may have been the population from which the sample was drawn as the study was conducted in a public university within a suburban area. While the population of the study is somewhat diverse, a larger population of minority students may have yielded different results. The number of students who reported a non-white race was too small to conduct analyses on any single race

other than white which caused the need to blend all non-majority races into one category. This could have obscured differences in the imposter phenomenon between the non-white races.

For future research, this study could be replicated with a larger, more diverse population which would allow for more adequate representation of the core predictor variables in the study. Future research could also utilize qualitative methodology to help understand the experiences of first-generation students and the reasons why they express characteristics that are phenomenon logically similar to the imposter phenomenon.

### **Conclusion**

In the current study, we set out to find the difference in imposter phenomenon between first-generation and non-first-generation students. This study of 203 students found no significant difference between first-generation and non-first-generation students with relation to imposter phenomenon. We did, however, find white first-generation students reported higher levels of imposter phenomenon than white, non-first-generation students. It is important to know who is affected by the imposter phenomenon because of the wide implications it may pose. Those with imposter phenomenon may not achieve their full potential, may have difficulty enjoying their success, and may fail to encapsulate a realistic sense of themselves (Clance et al., 1995). Knowing who may need counseling or assistive services to combat this problem may be key to developing competent and educated professionals.

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