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Honor's Thesis Proposal

Working title:

The Impostor Phenomenon among Business Students and Its Workplace Implication

Background and Significance:

In every profession there are people that appear competent and successful, yet under the mask of confidence, these high-achievers constantly doubt their own capabilities and fear being exposed as a fraud. They do not see themselves as others do and often contribute their success to luck, being at the right place at the right time, or knowing the right people. This peculiar mentality, though seemingly absurd, is more common among the successful than people normally think. These self-doubting feelings are popularly known as the "impostor syndrome" or "impostor phenomenon" (IP), because people troubled with these feelings often see themselves as impostors. Gail Matthews in the 1980s conducted a survey of both men and women, working in diverse professions and found that about 70% of them had felt like a fake at some stage of their career (Young, 2011).

The impostor phenomenon is problematic because it can have negative effects not only on one's personal life but also on one's professional career. For example, research has shown a positive correlation between impostor feelings and self-handicapping behaviors (Northcraft & Ashford, 1990). Self-handicapping refers to counterproductive actions people take to avoid negative evaluations, to externalize failures, and to internalize successes (Jones & Berglas, 1978). Furthermore, IP feelings are also problematic in inter-personal relationships. One study of

university professors has shown a negative correlation between the impostor phenomenon and teaching excellence and good advising relationships. The authors established a relationship between the impostor feelings and a non-fully or unhealthily developed self, which led to difficulty in developing supportive and guiding relationships (Brems et al., 1994). Not only will impostor feelings keep the employees from giving their best performance, it will also hinder managers' effort to be effective and helpful in their leadership position. Therefore, the impostor phenomenon should be on the minds of supervisors and Human Resource managers.

Despite the seemingly important implications of the impostor phenomenon, we do not adequately understand what causes individuals to feel this way. Psychologists generally attribute the impostor feelings to certain personality traits. For example, a recent study conducted by Bernard and colleagues in this area found that IP feelings are positively correlated with neuroticism and negatively correlated with conscientiousness (Bernard et. al., 2002).

Because personality theories often view personality as a combination of nature and nurture. It is reasonable to suspect that impostor feelings may be influenced by the social context in which an individual is embedded. As such, organizations and managers can greatly benefit by deepening our understanding of the impostor phenomenon so they can design situations that lessen the likelihood of triggering IP feelings and so they can effectively identify and mentor their member who might be struggling with these feelings. Because IP sufferers are generally high performers, managers and supervisors will need to know how to deal with these behaviors and feelings to retain these talents as well as helping the IP sufferers to achieve their highest potential.

Statement of Intent:

This project intends to explore the existence of the impostor phenomenon among 20 accounting students in Marriott School of Management, the antecedents and consequences of the impostor phenomenon among these students, and the effectiveness of the coping strategies used by these students to deal with these difficult feelings.

Methodology/Procedures:

The data for this project consists of transcripts from interview with 20 accounting students in the Marriott School conducted by my thesis advisor and his co-authors for an ongoing research project.

In the initial stage of the interview, interviewees were eased into the interview by describing what had motivated them to choose accounting as their major and their first year experience in the program. They were then asked to evaluate their own academic performance in the Core as well as other areas in which they have compared themselves with others.

During the second stage of the interview, the concept of IP was explained to the interviewees, and they were asked to self-report on a 10 point scale how much this definition of the impostor phenomenon described them personally. The interviewees were then asked to describe in detail what events had trigged these feelings in the past. Analyses of this section of the interview scripts should yield a pattern of the events that provoke impostor feelings.

The third stage of the interview discussed coping mechanisms used by individuals struggling with IP feelings. The interviewees were asked to identify factors that magnify or diminish the IP feelings based on their personal experience. They were also encouraged to talk about methods they have witnessed others use to cope with impostor feelings. Analyses of this

section of the interview should find a set of common behaviors engaged to manage the impostor feelings among IP sufferers.

During the next section of the interview, the interviewees were asked to elaborate on how the impostor feelings had affected their attitudes, behavior, and performance. The closing section of the interview askes the interviewees about the effect of impostor feelings in other life domains. Analyses of these sections should reveal the cost of impostor feelings and build the basis for workplace application of the findings.

These interview transcripts will be analyzed using grounded theory building methods (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Corley & Gioia, 2004). This type of qualitative analysis requires frequent iterations between the data and the emerging model. In stage one of the data analysis, I will read through each interview and use open coding to generate provisional codes that capture the triggers, management, and consequences of impostor feelings for each interviewee. Coding is a method of "meaning condensation" (Lee, 1999: pg. 89) that facilitates the extraction of relevant themes in the data. A code is usually applied to data "chunks" that range in size from a single word to multiple paragraphs (Miles & Huberman, 1994) that are highly similar to the respondents own words. After this open coding process I will return to the data to create more abstract theoretical categories from the first order codes that capture themes and patterns across all the interviews. Throughout the process, I will create data definitions and store codes and definitions in a data dictionary. I will also create a malleable pictorial representation of the emerging constructs and relationships that will ultimately result in a final conceptual model.

Human and Animal Subjects Approval:

Project is based on interview data that has already been collected with IRB approval. As a result, no additional approval is required.

Preliminary Outline

This thesis will follow a standard layout to present my analysis. Below is the preliminary outline:

i.   Title Page

ii. Table of Content

iii. Abstract

iv. Acknowledgements

v.   Background and Introduction

vi. Significance to Management

vii. Methodology

viii. Analysis of Results

ix. Application to Workplace

x.   Discussion

xi. Bibliography

Qualifications of the Investigator:

I am currently enrolled in the Master of Accounting (MAcc) program at Brigham Young University. As the basic language of business, the accounting knowledge I have accumulated has given me a broad view of general business and management. In addition, I have completed numerous courses in business management, organizational behavior, and psychology. These

experiences serve as tools needed to accomplish the project. They have enabled me to bridge psychological concepts with the business world. Below is a list of course I have finished (or currently enrolled in) that are relevant to this project:

ACC 402   Cost and Managerial Accounting

BUS M 540   Organizational Behavior

BUS M 582   Managerial Ethics

ORG B 327   Human Resource Management

PSYCH 111   Introduction to Psychology

PSYCH 330   Organizational Psychology (will be recognized upon minor approval)

PSYCH 341   Personality

Qualifications of Faculty Advisor:

Doctor Jeff Bednar will advise me on this project. Dr. Bednar has a PhD in Management and Organizations from the University of Michigan. He is an Assistant Professor in the Organizational Leadership and Strategy Department at Brigham Young University. He has published research on identity issues related to individuals and organizations in various books and journals including the Academy of Management Review, Academy of Management Journal, and Organization Science.

Dr. Bednar is currently conducting research on the antecedents and consequences of the impostor phenomenon. He will be a great source of information and guidance. And I will be using the data he has collected to write my thesis.

Schedule:

The project, if conducted appropriately, will follow the below timeline:

Proposal submitted: April 10, 2016

Preliminary data analysis: April 30, 2016

Second round analysis: May 20, 2016

Data analysis finished: June 10, 2016

First draft of thesis ready for review: July 1, 2016

Second draft of thesis ready for review: August 1, 2016

Final draft of thesis ready for defense: August 20, 2016

Expenses/Budget:

There is no expected expenses for this project. I will not require outside funding.

Bibliography

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory (3rd ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Corley, Kevin G., and Dennis A. Gioia. "Identity ambiguity and change in the wake of a corporate spin-off." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 49.2 (2004): 173-208.

Bernard, N. S., Dollinger, S. J., & Ramaniah, N. V. (2002). Applying the Big Five Personality Factors to the Impostor Phenomenon. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 78(2), 321-333.

Brems, C., Baldwin, M. R., Davis, L., & Namyniuk, L. (1994). The Imposter Phenomenon as Related to Teaching Evaluations and Advising Relationships of University Faculty Members. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 65(2), 183.

Jones, E. E., & Berglas, S. (1978). Control of Attributions about the Self Through Self-handicapping Strategies: The Appeal of Alcohol and the Role of Underachievement. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 4(2), 200-206.

Lee, T. W. 1999. *Using Qualitative Methods in Organizational Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Matthew B. Miles and A. M. Huberman. 1994. *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook: Second Edition*. Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA.

Northcraft, G. B., & Ashford, S. J. (1990). The preservation of self in everyday life: The effects of performance expectations and feedback context on feedback inquiry. Organizational Behavior *and Human Decision Processes*, 47(1), 42-64.

Young, V. (2011). *The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women: Why Capable People Suffer from the Impostor Phenomenon and How to Thrive in Spite of It*. New York: Crown Business.

Annotated Bibliography

Brems, C., Baldwin, M. R., Davis, L., & Namyniuk, L. (1994). The Imposter Syndrome as Related to Teaching Evaluations and Advising Relationships of University Faculty Members. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 65(2), 183

Authors of this paper conducted surveys to determine whether there exist relationships "among the impostor feelings, level of self-development, advising relationships, and teaching evaluations" (p. 183) in academia. Referencing other sources and self-psychology, the authors establish a relationship between the impostor feelings and a non-fully or unhealthily developed self, which also implies difficulty in developing supportive and guiding relationships. 112 (out of 246 who received the survey) tenure-track faculties in a major northwest university participated in the survey. The research used the Clance IP scale to measure impostor feelings, Superiority and Goal Instability Scale to measure the development of self, and questionnaires about advising relationships with students, and student's evaluation of these professors. The survey was sent out and the data collected via campus mail. Later analysis showed that IP score was negatively related to teaching effectiveness and the number of students an instructor agreed to advise. For a career in academia, the Impostor Syndrome appeared to be counterproductive.

Chrisman, S. M., Pieper, W., Clance, P. R., Holland, C., & Glickauf-Hughes, C. (1995). Validation of the Clance Imposter Phenomenon Scale. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 65(3), 456-467.

This study compares the Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale and the newly developed Perceived Fraudulence Scale. The comparison shows that both scales measure the Impostor Syndrome in a similar manner with similar internal-consistency reliability. Discriminant validity is also provided for the CIPS. Specifically, the CIPS is substantially discriminable from measures of depression, self-esteem, self-monitoring, and social anxiety. Factor analysis also reveals that the CIPS contain three stable factors that demonstrate construct validity – fake, discount, and luck.
This study supports the use of both CIPS and PFS in evaluating the impostor feelings. However, given the shorter form and ease of administration, CIPS appears to be a more viable tool for research purposes.

Want, J., & Kleitman, S. (2006). Imposter phenomenon and self-handicapping: Links with parenting styles and self-confidence. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 40(5), 961-971.

Want and Kleitman used the IP scale, the Self-Handicapping Scale, the Parental Bonding Instrument, and The Esoteric Analogies Test to determine whether there are relationships among the Impostor Phenomenon, Self-Handicapping behaviors, parenting styles, and self-confidence. 115 people from diverse occupations participated in the study. The surveys were sent out and the data collected via mail. Results show that the impostor feelings are negatively correlated with paternal care/warmth and positively correlated with paternal overprotection. A significant relationship was also discovered between the Impostor Syndrome and Self-Handicapping. The correlation between the IP scores and SH scores is 0.53, at 10% confidence interval.

Self-handicapping behavior can be a barrier to high productivity and career achievements. The relationship between these IP and SH gives the study of IP significance in the business world. Additionally, the correlations among IP, paternal care, and paternal overprotection suggest that IP could be a developmental issue. Thus looking back to participants' past might not be a bad idea to identify the contributing factors to the Impostor Syndrome.

Northcraft, G. B., & Ashford, S. J. (1990). The preservation of self in everyday life: The effects of performance expectations and feedback context on feedback inquiry. Organizational Behavior *and Human Decision Processes*, 47(1), 42-64.

Northcraft and Ashford set up a stock market simulation to examine "the roles of performance expectations, feedback context, and self-esteem in feedback inquiry" (p. 42). 78 subjects participated in the study. In the paper, the authors identified three reasons why low self-esteem individuals are more avoidant to negative feedbacks. First, low self-esteem is associated with a weaker ego that perceives negative feedbacks as more threatening. Second, people with a low self-esteem generally have few defense mechanisms at their disposal to cope with negative information, making avoidance a more attractive strategy. Finally, negative feedbacks affect subsequent efficacy expectations more for low self-esteem individuals (p. 47).

People who suffer from intense impostor feelings are known to have low self-esteem. The tendency to avoid negative feedback of low self-esteem individuals explains the correlation between impostor feelings and self-handicapping behaviors, where these behaviors are employed to provide an escape goat for failure, which leads to negative evaluations.

Bernard, N. S., Dollinger, S. J., & Ramaniah, N. V. (2002). Applying the Big Five Personality Factors to the Impostor Phenomenon. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 78(2), 321-333.

Many studies have been done trying to connect the impostor feelings with specific personality traits. Authors of this paper surveyed 190 college students to exam the Impostor Phenomenon in terms of one of the most popular personality models – the Big Five Personality Factors. Participants each completed the Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale, the Perceived Fraudulence Scale, and the NEO–Personality Inventory– Revised. The authors hypothesized relationships among the impostor feelings, neuroticism, and conscientiousness. The results show that the impostor feelings are positively correlated with neuroticism and negatively correlated with conscientiousness. Depression, anxiety, and low self-discipline and perceived competence were also shown to exist in those with impostor feelings.

Another interesting finding is that though common thought to exist only in successful individuals, report GPA in this study was largely unrelated to one's impostor feelings. This could suggest that everyone suffers from the Impostor Syndrome at some level, the severity of the impostor feelings might not be related to the level of achievement either. This opens up doors for alternative interpretation as to how this phenomenon came to be.

Jones, E. E., & Berglas, S. (1978). Control of Attributions about the Self Through Self-handicapping Strategies: The Appeal of Alcohol and the Role of Underachievement. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 4(2), 200-206.

People would go out of their way to protect their self-image as competent and intelligent. When this conception is threaten, individuals would sometimes employ methods that others would deem strange to protect this view of self. These methods are self-handicapping. The self-handicapper might prefer underachievement to "avoid the most drastic implications of possible failure" (p. 202). In this paper, Jones and Berglas relate the use of alcohol to a self-handicapper's desire to externalize failure and internalize success.

Their research still provides valuable insight into the behavior of people with impostor feelings. As shown in the study conducted by Northcraft and Ashford (1990), self-handicapping is positively correlated with the impostor feelings. Therefore employees with impostor feelings are more likely to engage in self-handicapping behaviors, hindering productivity and self-development.

Another important finding in this study is the discussion on the suspected effect of conditional love and parental feedback on the fostering of self-handicapping. The authors present two scenarios. The child may think that competence is the condition for parental love, or "the child may have been rewarded for accidental attributes or performances that do not predict future success" (p. 200).

Mcfarlin, D. B., & Blascovich, J. (1981). Effects of self-esteem and performance feedback on future affective preferences and cognitive expectations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 40(3), 521-531.

>This experiment tested the hypothesis that though all individuals prefer success to failure, they cognitively expect success or failure basing on their chronic levels of self-esteem. The authors conducted a 3 by 3 randomized factorial experiment with a total of 64 female participants who have either high, moderate, or low self-esteem. Each group receives either success, failure, or no feedback for its member's performance. Results confirm the hypothesis.
>The interesting aspect of this study is the finding that participants with low chronic levels of self-esteem perceived their ability for future performance and expected actual future performance to be much lower than the other groups', regardless of the feedback on current performance.
>Past experience is generally the best predictor for future performance. But this concept is clearly not internalized by those who have severe impostor feelings, who most commonly have low self-esteem. The moral of this story is that feedback, even positive, will seldom be a comfort to employees suffering from impostor feelings. Traditional approach to performance evaluation is not likely to be helpful to these "impostor" employees.

Jr., J. K., & Sternberg, R. J. (1991). Perceived Fraudulence in Young Adults: Is There an 'Imposter Syndrome'? *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 56(2), 308-326.

>This study introduces a new measure of the Impostor Phenomenon, or perceived fraudulence. The researchers suspected that the Impostor Phenomenon involves depressive tendencies, self-criticism, social anxiety, achievement pressures, and self-monitoring skills. The new survey, Perceived Fraudulence Scale, along with a few other self-report measures, (PFS) was administrated to 50 undergraduate college students. Interviews and thought-listing exercises were also conducted with the participants. The results support the discriminant validity of PFS and confirm the authors' hypothesis. PFS is an alternative to CIPS as an instrument to evaluate one's impostor feelings.

Larson, J. R. (1989). The Dynamic Interplay Between Employees' Feedback-Seeking Strategies and Supervisors' Delivery of Performance Feedback. *Academy of Management Review*, 14(3), 408-422.

In this article, Larson examines the relationship between employees' feedback seeking behavior and the performance feedback they receive from their supervisors. The author focused on the situations where the employee is performing poorly and is about to receive negative feedbacks. In these circumstances, the author found that the employees tend to use certain feedback-seeking strategies to minimize the amount of negative. This is due to a deep-rooted motivation to maintain a positive self-esteem.

One noteworthy point the author discussed is that employees generally seek feedback that verifies what their self-image. Though Larson focuses on the positive-feedback-seeking behaviors, I can see this motive go either ways. If an "impostor" already firmly believes that his or her work is not as excellent as others think, constant positive feedback from the supervisor would do little but cause frustration. This could ultimately lead the employee to stop seeking feedback and spiral down further in his or her impostor feelings.