Impostor syndrome—when self-doubt misjudges achievement

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Individuals who have a pervasive sense that their reputations are not justified by their achievements may suffer from impostor syndrome. In such a case, a new study shows, negative feedback can lead to a real deterioration in performance.

Successful individuals who suffer from what is known as impostor syndrome believe that their success is undeserved and that others overestimate their competence. The term 'impostor syndrome' was coined in the late 1970s by two psychologists, Pauline Clance und Suzanne A. Imes, and applied in particular to some highly successful businesswomen.

Subsequent studies have attempted to determine the prevalence of this type of self-doubt and its impact on performance at work. These investigations have shown that both men and women can display the characteristic symptoms of the syndrome, and that its victims indeed tend to be found among those who have enjoyed outstanding levels of success—although it has been mostly studied with students in the academic context, as pointed out Professor Brooke Gazdag of the Institute for Leadership and Organization at LMU.

A new study, carried out by Brooke Gazdag and a team led by Rebecca L. Badawy of the Department of Management at Youngstown State University in Ohio, examines the role of gender in the impostor syndrome. As published in the journal *Personality and Individual Differences*, the authors report that males and females with impostor syndrome cope with accountability and react to negative feedback in different ways. If males who see themselves as impostors receive negative feedback and are held accountable for the performance by their superiors, they tend to react more negatively. Women subjected to similar conditions show no such deterioration in performance—on the contrary, they tend to redouble their efforts.

The researchers began their study with an online questionnaire to identify individuals who felt like impostors—and was specifically targeted to university undergraduates. Among the possible responses to the queries in the survey were: "I rarely do a project or task as well as I'd like to do it," or "Sometimes I'm afraid others will discover how much

knowledge or ability I really lack." In a second questionnaire, the participants were then asked to answer sample examination questions used to determine which undergraduates should be admitted to graduate school (i.e. GRE questions). These questions were administered in two separate batches.

After completing the first set of tasks, participants either received negative feedback—irrespective of their actual performance—or were (falsely) informed that their results would be made available to their current professor. In this study design, overall male impostors performed worse in the second test than in the first. "The male participants were more distressed by criticism and tended to give up quicker," says Gazdag. The female participants, on the other hand, put forth more effort and performed marginally better than their male counterparts after they had received negative feedback or had been told that their results would be shown to their professors. "Our study was exploratory in nature, but gender role theory can provides some insights into the findings," says Gazdag. "This theory would suggest that male work performance is strongly focused on competence and performance, whereas women have a stronger tendency to view work from a relational standpoint. The fact that women try harder when they are aware that their performance will be assessed by someone they know therefore conforms to the female stereotype."

More information: Rebecca L. Badawy et al. Are all impostors created equal? Exploring gender differences in the impostor phenomenon-performance link, *Personality and Individual Differences* (2018). DOI: 10.1016/j.paid.2018.04.044

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