Impostorism in Academia: Normalizing Feelings of Inadequacy and Insecurity

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Impostorism, a pervasive phenomenon characterized by feelings of professional inadequacy despite evident success, poses significant challenges in academia. This article examines the origins, manifestations, and impacts of impostorism among academic nurse educators. Additional discussions explore triggers of impostorism in academia, such as transitions to new roles and challenging work experiences and impostorism's detrimental effects on faculty well-being, job satisfaction, and performance. Strategies for addressing impostorism in academia, such as mentorship, social support, and self-reflection, are highlighted as potential interventions to mitigate its negative impacts and foster faculty development and satisfaction.

Keywords: Impostorism, faculty attrition, job satisfaction, professional insecurity, mentorship

Considering an ongoing, multidimensional faculty shortage in the United States and globally, nursing schools are struggling to recruit and retain sufficient, qualified faculty to operate at full student capacity (American Association of Colleges of Nursing [AACN], 2022). Therefore, it is necessary to evaluate potential factors that may influence faculty dissatisfaction and attrition in academia. One such faculty-related factor is that of the impostor phenomenon, or impostorism.

Impostorism Background

First mentioned in psychology publications in the 1970s, *impostorism* is an inaccurate, subjective, self-assessment that involves personalized feelings of professional and intellectual incompetence despite external evidence of success (Barrow, 2019; Clance & Imes, 1978). The concept is interchangeably called impostor syndrome, impostor phenomenon, or impostorism in the published literature. It is important to note that the spelling of *impostor* varies depending on the authors' countries of origin, with some descriptions of the concept as imposter syndrome or phenomenon. The concept of impostorism continues to evolve in multiple disciplines since its emergence in the 1970s, especially in the fields of psychology and higher education.

Impostorism goes deeper than the typical self-doubt that individuals may face throughout their lives, especially during times of significant life or work transitions. It is hallmarked by ongoing self-doubt and feelings of professional illegitimacy concerning personal ability and intelligence (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017). In addition, impostors often employ maladaptive coping mechanisms like overpreparation to conceal their self-perceived weaknesses and failures from others (Hutchins et al., 2018). Impostors believe their successes derive from external factors beyond their control, like luck or fate, because of a heightened focus on an external locus of control. Therefore, impostors struggle to self-validate, instead requiring validation from external sources. This tendency leads impostors to be very self-conscious with a strong desire to please others (Lane, 2015). These impaired attribution tendencies do not allow impostors to equate successes to their own efforts or competence.

Impostorism in Higher Education

Most impostorism research focusing on the higher education environment has included samples of students across multiple disciplines and various academic programs. There is limited impostorism research focused on academic faculty (Chakraverty, 2022), with very few involving samples of nursing-specific educators (Freeman et al., 2022). However, despite the limited research, impostorism tendencies are common among individuals who work in stressful, competitive environments similar to the "publish or perish" culture within academia (Hutchins, 2015; Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017). Transitioning to new work roles, such as the transition from clinician to academic faculty, can increase feelings of impostorism (Freeman et al., 2022). Some

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research supports a trend of stronger feelings of impostorism in early-career, tenure-track faculty who may be competing among colleagues for tenure, promotion, and funding opportunities. Once faculty earn tenure, feelings of impostorism begin to diminish (Hutchins, 2015).

Faculty in the south-central region of the United States reported experiencing heightened impostorism tendencies when having their expertise questioned by colleagues or students and in relation to scholarly productivity (e.g., struggling with creating grant proposals, receiving negative peer review feedback on manuscript submission, etc.) (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017). Likewise, Chakraverty (2022) noted the following themes related to impostorism from 42 higher education faculty across 23 states: faculty evaluations, peer comparison, public recognition, perceived lack of competency, and anticipatory fear of not knowing. Specific examples that exacerbated impostorism tendencies included transitioning from doctoral student to faculty, receiving research funding, navigating the tenure/promotion process, receiving harsh peer reviews, presenting at professional conferences, and professional networking (Chakraverty, 2022).

Such possible triggering events are common in academia; however, for individuals with heightened impostorism tendencies, such events are marked by perfectionistic work patterns, negative self-talk, and inaccurate personal attribution of successes and failures.

Negative Impostorism Impacts

Impostors typically overperform within a maladaptive perfectionistic ideal to avoid being discovered as a fraud by peers. This overworking and extreme preparation leads impostors to feel emotionally exhausted from their work (Hutchins et al., 2018). Other commonly cited negative manifestations of high levels of impostorism include anxiety, depression, decreased emotional stability, feelings of inferiority, and reduced self-efficacy (Bravata et al., 2020).

Since impostors relentlessly pursue achievement within the context of being unable to accept that their successes are earned due to their own intelligence and ability, impostors often experience increased levels of job burnout and stress aligned with declines in job satisfaction and performance over time (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017). Impostors may feel embarrassed of their negative feelings, leading them to hide their feelings through defensive behaviors (Kanatova,

2023). In academic faculty, higher levels of self-reported impostorism were associated with poorer job performance, decreased student evaluation of instruction, and heightened self-reported anxiety (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017)

Challenging work experiences can lead to personal and professional growth; however, impostors will likely struggle through issues like scholarly productivity challenges and having their expertise questioned without effective personal coping techniques (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017). Because they feel fraudulent in their current roles and seek to avoid additional attention that new workplace opportunities may bring, impostors may avoid new job opportunities (Barrow, 2019). This tendency may manifest in avoiding promotions to leadership roles out of fear of being in the spotlight. Avoidant coping behaviors may result in impostors not reaching their fullest potential in the academic workplace.

Impostorism Interventions in Academia

Due to their fears of being discovered to be an academic fraud, impostors may not readily discuss their feelings and concerns with others. Therefore, workplace interventions that legitimize impostorism as a normalized experience in competitive workplaces can open the door to other active coping mechanisms like mentorship and support groups (Hutchins et al., 2018). New faculty orientation can incorporate some information on impostorism and how to develop successful coping techniques.

Social support is vital as an applied coping response for impostorism. Mentoring is necessary to alleviate some of the negative consequences of impostorism in nursing faculty. Specifically, mentors can offer reassurance that impostor feelings are common while helping struggling academics take ownership of their previous successes and accomplishments (Hutchins, 2015). Faculty struggling with self-doubt and impostorism may benefit from self-reflection and journaling about previous accomplishments to see how their knowledge, skills, and hard work led to those successes. Maintaining an ongoing list of personal wins can provide a reality check when maladaptive fears of failure reveal themselves before a big project (Kanatova, 2023).

There is very little empirical research on interventions to help correct negative thinking patterns associated with impostorism (Hutchins & Flores, 2021). The

techniques mentioned above are anecdotal and based on qualitative interview suggestions from self-reporting impostors. However, published scientific literature overwhelmingly points to the need to openly discuss impostorism to allow impostors to see the universality of their feelings. More intervention-focused research is needed to provide academic leaders with evidence-based resources to help their faculty struggling with impostorism successfully socialize into the nurse educator role with improved job satisfaction. **DN**

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