

Full Length Research Paper

Finding Courage and Confirmation: Resisting Impostor Feelings through Relationships with Mentors, Romantic Partners, and Other Women in Leadership

Amy Aldridge Sanford, Elaina M. Ross, Shawna J. Blake, and Renée L. Cambiano

Amy Aldridge Sanford: Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, amy.aldridge.sanford@tamucc.edu

Elaina M. Ross: Northeastern State University, rossem@nsuok.edu

Shawna J. Blake: Northeastern State University, blakes@nsuok.edu

Renée L. Cambiano: Northeastern State University, cambiare@nsuok.edu

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The Impostor Phenomenon (IP) has recently reappeared in popular culture as a result of the bestseller *Lean In*. IP asserts that many successful people feel like frauds that will be discovered in time. Twenty-nine women in leadership were interviewed in this qualitative study, and it was discovered that the majority of them do not have impostor feelings. Their confidence can be attributed to strong relationships with mentors, romantic partners, and other women in leadership.

Keywords: Impostor Phenomenon, Women in Leadership, Mentoring, Lean In, CIPS

Introduction

The Impostor Phenomenon, initially labeled in scholarly literature during the 1970s, resurged in popular culture in 2013 as a result of the best selling book *Lean In*. In the book, author Sheryl Sandberg made the argument that the feminist revolution was stalled and that women needed to simply *lean in* to get it moving again: “Women are hindered by barriers that exist within ourselves... My argument is that getting rid of these internal barriers is critical to gaining power” (p. 8). Feminists called out Sandberg for blaming women rather than existing patriarchal structures for the “feminist stall” (see Brooks, 2014; Dowd, 2013; Hewlett, 2013; hooks, 2013; Parsons, 2013; Turner, 2013). hooks (2013) wrote: “Sandberg uses feminist rhetoric as a front to cover her commitment to western cultural imperialism, to white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (par. 29).

Copycat books followed *Lean In*, including *The Confidence Code* (2014), which was promoted as a book to help women become more aware of their potential lack of confidence and how to resist it. Like Sandberg, the authors of *The Confidence Code* believed that cultural and institutional barriers were secondary to internal barriers or self-belief. These internal barriers are often referred to as the Impostor Phenomenon—the feeling that someone will, at some point, discover that you are actually a fraud, unworthy of current position or success.

Impostor Phenomenon

Impostor Phenomenon (IP), also known as Impostor Syndrome or Fraud Syndrome, was first coined by researchers Clance and Imes in 1974 (Clance, 1985) and was inspired by an article authored by Martina Horner that appeared 5 years earlier in *Psychology Today*. In the 1969 article, Horner discussed the double bind successful women faced: wanting to do well in both school and work to live up to their own expectations, but knowing that success outside the home meant not living up to society’s expectations of women’s traditional roles. Clance, a college professor and psychologist with a private practice, had noticed that her own female students and female clients had doubts regarding their success. She and Imes, another psychologist, interviewed 150 successful women and came to label this doubt as IP. Clance was careful not to label it a syndrome because she was afraid people would just see it as “one more thing wrong with women” (personal communication, June 22, 2014).

People who suffer with IP have intense, secret feelings of fraudulence (Harvey & Katz, 1985) and believe that most people are smarter than they are (Kets de Vries, 2005). IP victims do not believe they have what it takes to complete important work and are in constant fear of failure (Clance, 1985; Harvey & Katz, 1985). They have to be the very best at

everything they do (Clance, 1985). Kumar and Jagacinski (2006) found that women, in particular, feel they must outperform others to be competent; it is not good enough just to become better at tasks. Sufferers of IP tend to be very capable, yet they look at their success as luck or a result of extremely hard work, personal charm, or knowing the right person. They never attribute the success to their capabilities or intelligence (Clance & Imes, 1978; Li, Hughes & Thu, 2014). Clance (1985) said that the most dominant characteristic of IP victims is their inability to believe compliments. Harvey and Katz (1985) explained that IP victims believe in one True self, and if the outer behavior (success) and the inner feelings (doubt of ability) don't match up, they feel that they are being fraudulent. They believe the inner feelings are the Truth (Harvey & Katz, 1985).

Kets de Vries (2005) said it is a rare leader who has not suffered from IP. "All truly competent people know that to a certain extent they're 'impostors'" (Young, 2011, p. 229). It is estimated that 70 percent of all successful people have experienced IP at some time (Matthews & Gibbs, 1985). Young (2011) said it doesn't bother a lot of people to know that they may have to fake it until they make it. IP researchers Harvey (Harvey & Katz, 1985), Clance (1985), and Young (2011) have all written about their personal impostor feelings in their personal lives and careers.

IP is not recognized as a formal psychiatric condition or syndrome (Jarrett, 2010) and should not be confused with insecurity or low self-esteem. As Harvey and Katz (1985) explained, people with IP like to keep it a secret, whereas, people who are insecure often do not keep their insecurity a secret. People with IP often have high self-esteem but feel like impostors in one particular area in their lives (Young, 2011).

How IP Manifests

IP victims tend to make very good initial impressions (Clance, 1985) and seem remarkably able and accomplished to the outside world (Young, 2011). "People with IP do want to be smart, to look smart, and they sometimes feel as if they are. It's not that the impostor feelings are there all the time" (Clance qtd. in Jarrett, 2010). The IP feelings diminish with experience, observation, and on-the-job learning (Hirschfeld, 1982), but never completely go away for a sufferer (Young, 2011). Comedian Tina Fey recognized IP on a continuum in her own life:

The beauty of the impostor syndrome [sic] is you vacillate between extreme egomania, and a complete feeling of: "I'm a fraud! Oh god, they're on to me! I'm a fraud!" So you just try to ride the egomania when it comes and enjoy it, and then slide through the idea of fraud. Seriously, I've just realized that almost everyone is a fraud, so I try not to feel too bad about it. ("Tina Fey - From spoofer to movie stardom," 2010)

Vivian Schiller, first female CEO of NPR, told a reporter:

I suffered from impostor syndrome [sic] for a long time. I would get promoted and I would think, don't they know? What are they thinking? Or I'd get a new job and I'd think, god, I've fooled them. Wait till they find out. It wasn't with me all the time, but it was a hum in the back of my head. (Schiller qtd. in Sherr, 2009, par. 33)

Researchers agreed that IP is most prominent when a person takes on a new job or project (Clance, 1985; Clance, Dingman, Reviere, & Stober, 1995; Harvey & Katz, 1985; Hirschfeld, 1982; Jarrett, 2010; Kets de Vries, 2005; Matthews & Clance, 1985; Young, 2011). It is during these times of change that people become most visible, often with less support and mentoring than they may have had before (Kets de Vries, 2005). IP victims need mentors to validate their ability, talent, and intelligence, particularly when starting a new job or taking on a new project. They need a stamp of approval, even if they do not believe the praise when they get it (Clance & Imes, 1978). Clance (1985) described the IP cycle this way: New Challenge → Acceptance → Joy/Good Feelings → Denial of Previous Success → Bad Dreams/Worry/Fear → Immobility/Procrastination or Overpreparation → Frenzied Work → Success → Praise → Temporary Relief.

The Most Susceptible

Clance and Imes (1978) only interviewed women for the study that ultimately coined the term IP. At the time, they believed IP predominantly occurred in women. Harvey and Katz (1985), who published a book on IP the same year that Clance did, believed that IP was first discovered in women as a direct result of consciousness raising that occurred during women's liberation. They believed that women were willing to examine their feelings in ways that men were not at the time. Over the years, many studies have shown that men and women are comparable in their feelings of fraudulence (see Cromwell, Brown, Sanchez-Huceles, & Adair, 1990; Ferrari & Thompson, 2006; Langford & Clance, 1993; Matthews & Clance, 1985). In fact, Topping and Kimmel (1985), who surveyed university professors, conducted the *only* study in which men scored higher on IP feelings than women in the same study.

More recent studies have shown that women experienced IP at higher rates than men (see Cusak, Hughes, and Nuhu, 2013; Kumar & Jagacinski, 2006; Li et al., 2014). In 1995, Clance et al. said IP is particularly hard for women because they must overcome society's norms. Kets de Vries (2005) said that women who have success in a way that is contrary to what they were told about gender roles growing up are especially vulnerable for feeling like frauds. If their mothers stayed home, they often feel guilty for being working mothers. In addition to bucking societal norms, women may be more susceptible to IP than men because they: (a) have been taught to use charm to avoid coming across as unfeminine (Harvey & Katz, 1985); (b) tend to be other-oriented and do not want to hurt others by being more successful than them (Young, 2011); (c) are insecure working in male-dominated corporate cultures (Kets de Vries, 2005; Young, 2011); and (d) dwell on other people's

opinions about them (Dweck, 2006). Matthews and Gibbs (1985) said that women's IP seemed more intense than men's, and more difficult to modify. Young (2011) believed that IP holds women back more than men.

It is not just biological sex that causes a person to be susceptible to IP. Other vulnerable groups include: (a) people who work in professional fields where the other biological sex dominates (Harvey & Katz, 1985; Young, 2011); (b) people who have attained success very early in their careers, rapidly, and/or at a young age (Matthews & Clance, 1985); (c) those who are first in the family to achieve success or get a college degree (Clance, 1985; Clance et al., 1995; Harvey & Katz, 1985; Young, 2011); (d) introverts (Clance, 1985); (e) first-born children (Kets de Vries, 2005); (f) people in creative fields, such as actors, artists, and musicians (Young, 2011); and (g) students, probably as a result of regular high-stakes grading and evaluation (Clance, 1985).

Causes of Impostor Feelings

Most researchers agreed that impostor feelings are rooted in early family relationships (Clance, 1985; Clance & Imes, 1978; Harvey & Katz, 1985; Kets de Vries, 2005; Li et al., 2014; Want & Kleitman, 2006). "Many of our fundamental views about ourselves—and eventually our views about our own competence and our potential for success—began with our families and how our parents and/or siblings saw us and how they conveyed what they saw" (Clance, 1985, p. 32). Additionally, teachers, coaches, and other significant adults from childhood can also play a role (Young, 2011).

Impostors are more likely to describe their families as unsupportive and emotionally distant. Interactions in the family involve overt displays of conflict and anger (Bussotti, 1990). Imes (qtd. in Kaplan, 2009) said that there might have been support for achievement but no validation for feelings within these families, "so they grow up thinking their worth or value is tied only to achievement" (Imes qtd. in Kaplan, 2009, p. 469). People with IP have a high need to please their families (Bussotti, 1990). Additionally, they don't want to lose the affection of their families because they are different or more successful than them (Clance, 1985).

Many people believe IP is related to cultural expectations ("Academic culture feeds the Impostor Phenomenon," 2005). This is particularly true for women:

In addition to their career, work, or academic position, they [women] expect themselves and are expected by society to take on many responsibilities and care for the home and any children, work on their relationships, caretaker for parents and family, etc. They are expected to do well at their jobs and to do everything else. It is all right for them to have careers provided they fulfill all of their other duties first. Guilt about the career is a common experience. (Clance & O'Toole, 1987, p. 54)

A study conducted by Galinsky et al. (2003) included nearly 2,000 executives (those within two levels of reporting to the CEO) from 10 global companies, including Citigroup, IBM, Marriott, and Procter & Gamble. About 60% of the respondents were from the United States. The contrast between men and women was startling: 79% of women were married while 94% of the men were married. Seventy-five percent of the men were married to women who stayed home; 74% of the female executives had a spouse who also worked full-time outside the home. Women just did not have the support in the home that the men did. With that in mind, it should come as no surprise that more men (54%) than women (43%) had aspirations to join the senior management team and that more men (19%) than women (9%) dreamed of being the CEO one day.

Impostor Naysayers

There have been a handful of researchers that have disagreed with the body of research surrounding IP. Leary, Patton, Orlando, and Funk (2000) found that research subjects showed signs of IP only when they thought others would know their scores on an intelligence test. The researchers, who doubted the validity of IP, believed that humility was a way to lower other people's expectations and gain interpersonal benefits with a humble presentation of self. McElwee and Yurak (2007) said that people with IP do not feel like frauds because they do not believe that others view them more positively than they view themselves. Basically, they just suffer from low self-esteem. McElwee and Yurak (2010) argued that since everyone in their sample could come up with a recall situation then everyone must experience IP and that it is not unique to anyone in particular. In response to these studies, Clance (qtd. in Jarrett, 2010) pointed out that they were conducted with convenience samples of college students who may or may not be considered successful.

Harms

There are many harms related to IP, including: (a) reinforcement of the stereotype that women do not want to lead (Tarr-Whelan, 2009); (b) unrealistic perfectionism (Cusak, Hughes & Nuhu, 2013; Imes qtd. in Kaplan, 2009; Kets de Vries, 2005; Leung, 2006; Thompson, Foreman, & Martin, 2000); (c) test anxiety (Cusak et al., 2013, Imes qtd. in Kaplan, 2009); (d) self sabotage (Cowman & Ferrari, 2002; Kets de Vries, 2005; Want & Kleitman, 2006); (e) burn out (Kets de Vries, 2005; Leung, 2006; Parkman & Beard, 2008); (f) fear of questioning the status quo (Clance & Imes, 1978; Clance et al., 1995; Parkman & Beard, 2008); (g) dissatisfaction with self performance (Thompson et al., 2000); (h) procrastination (Clance et al., 1995; Kets de Vries, 2005); (i) inability to make a decision (Kets de Vries, 2005); (j) tolerating sexual harassment (Clance et al., 1995); (k) not reaching full potential (Clance & O'Toole, 1987); and (l) higher absenteeism and high employee turnover (Kets de Vries, 2005).

Surprisingly, there is one advantage to feelings of fraudulence discussed by McIntosh (1985) in a speech referenced in the pages of *Lean In*. It turns out McIntosh had very mixed feelings

about IP. On one hand, she believed it was deplorable that women have been made to feel fraudulent by internalized value systems in our society. On the other hand, she believed that IP allowed women to deeply refuse feeling good about roles in oppressive hierarchies.

We feel fraudulent, I think, partly because we know that usually those who happen to get the high titles and the acclaim and the imagery going with them are not 'the best and the brightest,' and we don't want to pretend to be so either. (McIntosh, 1985, p. 4)

Treatment for IP

Most of the IP research comes out of the discipline of psychology, so it should come as no surprise that therapy is recommended for those suffering from IP (Clance & O'Toole, 1987; Langford & Clance, 1993; Matthews & Clance, 1985; Topping & Kimmel, 1985). In fact, many IP sufferers have depression or anxiety and may need to seek medical help (Clance et al., 1995; Kaplan, 2009).

For less severe cases, Kaplan (2009) suggested finding a supportive and understanding mentor and a partner to talk through impostor feelings. Mentors can help create confidence (McIntosh, 1985), but it is important for mentors to be aware of the protégé's IP feelings (Leung, 2006). IP victims typically suffer in silence and are often relieved when they find out others suffer from the same feelings of fraudulence (Clance, 1985; Matthews & Clance, 1985).

Research Questions

Most IP studies have been conducted quantitatively within the field of psychology. The populations tend to be convenience samples of university students. In the spirit of the original research conducted by Clance and Imes (1978), our study will also employ in-depth qualitative interviewing and the respondents will be women who identify as leaders. We hope to answer two questions:

RQ1: How do successful women discuss the presence of the Impostor Phenomenon in their lives?

RQ2: How do women in leadership resist feelings of fraudulence?

Research Design

This project was approved by the institutional review boards represented by the authors and was initially inspired by the best-selling book *Lean In* and the controversial reactions to it. Initially, the researchers developed a 96-question Likert survey based upon statements made from cover to cover in *Lean In*. (Very little attention was paid to IP in the original survey). The instrument was sent electronically to 20 women who had volunteered as mentors for female college students at a Midwestern regional university. Most of the women were educators, law enforcement officers, entrepreneurs, lawyers, and executives. The respondents were asked to complete the survey and send the link to other women within their

professional and personal networks. At the end of two weeks, the researchers had 130 completed surveys from across the country.

From the women's responses, it was clear that they disagreed with Sandberg or were split amongst themselves in a few key areas: (a) mentoring; (b) parenting; (c) romantic partners; and (d) a collapsed area that was labeled "women in leadership positions." This fourth area included subareas of ambition, impostor syndrome, likeability, and equality. The three interviewers created a qualitative interview protocol to probe further into these areas. Sixty-five of the survey respondents (exactly 50%) agreed to be contacted for qualitative interviews. Of those, 61 had working email addresses and 33 women agreed to in-person interviews. In the end, 29 semi-structured interviews were scheduled and conducted either face-to-face or over the phone during the course of nine months. Interviews took place until each of the three interviewers felt that she had reached theoretical saturation (the point at which no new themes are emerging and there is enough evidence to support the themes that were generated during the interviews) with her data set.

It appears the interview experiences were fairly consistent for the respondents. All interviewers used the same protocol and were in constant communication with each other regarding the interviewing process. The average interview length for each interviewer (51 minutes, 49 minutes, and 49 minutes) was within two minutes of each other. Overall, interviews lasted an average of 50 minutes, ranging from 24 to 80 minutes. The ages of the participants ranged from 26 to 79 years, with a mean of 45 years old. The majority of respondents reported their race as White (79%), and the rest of the respondents identified as mixed raced White/American Indian (14%) or as American Indian (7%). Although this is well above the 2% of American Indians who make up the nation's population, this is not an unusual demographic considering that the research originated with 20 participants in a region of the country that has a large American Indian population. All qualitative informants were given pseudonyms (see Table 1 for more information about each respondent).

All interviews were audio recorded and dominant themes were transcribed. The qualitative data was coded using the constant comparative method (see Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The researchers initially approached the data holistically and took note of the themes that emerged. The themes were generated inductively and were compared and collapsed until the surviving themes offered a problem to explore. As research professor Brené Brown (2012) pointed out, researchers should not come with a problem or a hypothesis or a literature review when employing grounded research. They should come with a topic and let the participants define the problem. It became clear during the coding and collapsing process that the Impostor Phenomenon was the dominant theme or problem for the respondents.

Table 1:
Information about the Respondents

Pseudonym	Job Title	Age	Ethnicity	Relationship Status	Dependents	Length of Interview in minutes
Alex	director at a tribe	49	Am Indian	Married	2 children—ages 18 and 19	38
Alyssa	administrative assistant at business management consulting firm	26	White	Engaged	Adult brother lives with them from time to time	55
Angela	judge	45	White	Married	3 children—ages 10-15	52
Ashlee	community relations coordinator at a tribe	28	White/Am Indian	Long-term relationship	None	35
Barbara	director at a regional university	61	White	Married	2 children in their 20s & occasionally cares for 2 grandchildren—ages 4-8	55
Betty	executive assistant at a regional university, retired	79	White	Married	3 children – in their 50s	45
Brittany	media coordinator at a regional university	27	White	Single	None	24
Cecilia	director at a tribe	41	Am Indian	Married	4 children—ages 1-18	48
Crystal	assistant professor at a regional university	39	White	Divorced; Live In	5 children—ages 3-10	57
Diane	owns a PR firm and is a firearms instructor	42	White	Single, twice divorced	5 children- ages 6,8,10,19,and 23	54
Donna	director at a regional university	46	White	Single; Divorced	None	52
Edna	mid-level administrator at a regional university, retired	66	White	Married	4 adult stepchildren	46
Emily	vice president of a large PR firm	34	White	Married	1 child—age 4	55
Jennifer	coordinator at a regional university	30	White	Married	2 children—ages 1 and 5	44
Jill	works at a retreat center	67	White	Married	2 children, ages 35 and 31	41

Karen	manager at a nonprofit	54	White	Married	Caretaker for her aging parents	50
Kate	director at a regional university	35	White/Am Indian	Married	1 child—age 2	54
Kathryn	owns two health consulting firms	31	White	Divorced; dating someone for a month	None	48
Lisa	administrator at a regional university	45	White	Married	4 children—ages 15-25	76
Liz	attorney at a tribe	36	White/Am Indian	Married	1 child—age 10; occasionally cares for 12-year-old niece	59
Mary	mid management for a national professional association	57	White	Never married, currently single	Mother—age 89	45
Melissa	director at a tribe	35	White/Am Indian	Long-term boyfriend; not live in	None	80
Michelle	administrator at community college	46	White	Dating 2 years	2 children—ages 15 and 16	33
Mona	executive assistant at a regional university	50	White	Married	2 children—ages 24 and 27; recently started caring for aging parents	56
Rhonda	owns a small law firm	35	White	Married	stepson—age 10; two daughters—ages 2 and 1	35
Rosie	instructor at a regional university	47	White	Married	2 children, ages 14 and 16	39
Stephanie	director at a community college	50	White	Live In	2 children in their 30s; 89 year-old-grandmother lives across the street	58
Susan	administrator at a regional university	53	White	Married	1 child—age 30	57
Tammy	elementary school teacher	40	White	Married	2 children—ages 14 and 20	46

The Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (CIPS) allowed for triangulation of the data. The CIPS is a 20-question, 5-point Likert scale developed by Clance (1985) and used by researchers to determine whether a person has impostor feelings and to what extent the feelings are experienced (measured as moderate, frequent, or intense). With permission from Clance (personal communication, June 22, 2014), we requested that the respondents complete the CIPS. All 29 interviewees complied. Twenty-eight of them experienced impostor feelings at the levels of moderate (66% of the 29 respondents), frequent (24% of the 29 respondents), or intense (7% of the 29 respondents). One respondent had fewer than moderate impostor feelings. (See Table 2 for information about each respondent's CIPS score). A Pearson r was computed to examine the relationship between the CIPS score and age. There was no relationship between the two variables ($r=.008$, $n=29$, $p=.969$).

Table 2

Scores from the Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (CIPS)

Pseudonym	CIPS	Category
Alex	50	Moderate
Alyssa	44	Moderate
Angela	76	Frequent
Ashlee	59	Moderate
Barbara	60	Moderate
Betty	54	Moderate
Brittany	68	Frequent
Cecilia	62	Frequent
Crystal	57	Moderate
Diane	45	Moderate
Donna	71	Frequent
Edna	60	Moderate
Emily	48	Moderate
Jennifer	45	Moderate
Jill	42	Moderate
Karen	53	Moderate
Kate	65	Frequent
Kathryn	57	Moderate
Lisa	83	Intense
Liz	50	Moderate
Mary	47	Moderate
Melissa	39	Few
Michelle	47	Moderate
Mona	65	Frequent
Rhonda	47	Moderate
Rosie	64	Frequent
Stephanie	52	Moderate
Susan	53	Moderate
Tammy	81	Intense

Findings

This study attempted to determine how successful women discuss the presence of the Impostor Phenomenon in their lives and resist feelings of fraudulence associated with IP. The results indicate that many of the participants did not experience IP, or experience it very little in their lives. Two major themes were discovered: (a) the lack of presence of IP and (b) how the respondents resist IP through relationships with mentors, other women of leadership, and romantic partners. The themes will be addressed as they relate to the research questions.

RQ 1: Presence of the Impostor Phenomenon

The first research question asked how successful women discuss the presence of the IP in their lives. Only about a quarter of our original 130 Likert survey respondents agreed with Sandberg's notion that high-achieving women feel like impostors with limited skills or abilities. Nearly 60% disagreed or strongly disagreed. The rest were undecided. The researchers were surprised by this response and wanted to explore it further during qualitative interviews. It was only one question in a protocol of more than a dozen questions, but the interviews quickly centered on IP. The respondents had a lot to say.

Only a small handful of our research participants (Angela, Rhonda, Kate, Tammy, and Lisa) discussed a constant presence of impostor feelings in their lives. The other participants discussed their current lack of impostor feelings or saw their impostor feelings as something in the past or temporary.

Imposter feelings. For all participants, impostor feelings originate from (a) lack of experience or youth and (b) not giving herself credit for personal success. Kathryn, a successful entrepreneur in her early 30s, felt like an impostor when she attended finance meetings in her 20s. Both Rhonda and Alyssa have avoided mentoring others because they did not feel like they have anything to offer. Kate, at 35 years old, constantly feels like she needs 10 more years of experience. Tammy, a teacher, admits that she never credits her ability: "I don't feel like the teacher they write about in my evaluations. I must be such a great actress." Both Angela and Jennifer said luck has played a significant role in their successes.

Impostor feelings have hurt the careers of the women interviewed in three fundamental ways: (a) career advancement; (b) self worth; and (c) honest communication with coworkers.

Career advancement. Alyssa, who just started a new job, has no long-term goals and did not negotiate her current salary. Brittney, who also just started a new job, says she is always second-guessing herself. Angela will not volunteer for leadership positions, even when she feels ready. When Liz was named chair of an important committee early in her law career, she referred to it as a curse: "I remember thinking, 'Why did you do this to me?'" Both Karen and Barbara had to be talked into job promotions in the past.

Self worth. Cecilia, who is in her early 40s, did not realize her self worth until she started at her current job a couple of months before the interview.

They sought me out. When they made the offer, I actually turned them down and threw a number out at them, and they jumped on it. And that's the first time in my life that I've ever thought "Oh my gosh. What I know is worth something to somebody." (Cecilia)

Jennifer has a constant nagging feeling that people do not like her: "I have a weird sense of humor and personality and think people think I'm weird." Lisa does not believe she deserves any of the opportunities she has been given: "When I read that book [*Lean In*], I cried during that section. I almost want to cry right now. I think they are going to find me out, that I'm not as good."

Honest communication with coworkers. Angela, a judge, couches what she says to coworkers because she does not want to be called "bitch" or "cunt." Rhonda, a lawyer, spreads her questions to different coworkers because she does not want to burden anybody with "stupid questions." Mona, an executive assistant, admitted it took her a long time to feel like she could speak up in committee meetings.

Lack of impostor feelings. Most of our 29 respondents believe they earned every opportunity they have been presented. Four common characteristics of these women include: (a) confidence; (b) goal setting; (c) seeking out opportunities to serve in leadership positions; and (d) experience.

Confidence. Emily, a corporate vice president, has felt like a woman in leadership since birth. She has never felt like an impostor, even when she first began in her industry. When Kathryn was in her 20s, she quit her job and went to Italy for a while.

Quitting what you're doing when you're on your upper trajectory to focus on what you really want in life in your 20s is a fairly risky move... I just have a pretty unwavering belief that it's all going to work out and that it's all going to be okay. (Kathryn)

Crystal, a college professor, said that her friends look up to her and that she is a good role model for her students. She made it clear that she does not believe that she has gotten all the honors and awards she deserves. Jill currently fills multiple positions for a non-profit, and felt that if she got a promotion or award she was ready for it. Susan described her current position as "a natural fit" because she has the credentials and experience. Melissa feels that she has earned the respect of her employees and coworkers and does not understand why women have to be told to lean in.

Goal setting. The respondents who lack IP have very clear goals and can articulate those goals, no matter how far out they may seem. Crystal did not hesitate when she shared her goals of opening up an organic restaurant and/or running for

political office. Kathryn plans to start focusing more on management of her consulting businesses and less on operations. Michelle's goal is to be a vice president at a university or college within the next couple of years. Stephanie wants to use her leadership skills in LGBT communities in the coming years.

Seeking out opportunities. Many of the women admitted to stepping up when things needed to get done. Edna, a recently retired college professor, has filed to be the president of her state professional association. Rosie calls herself a take-charge kind of person. It allows her to prove herself. Diane has successfully reinvented her career in public relations to allow for more time with her children after her divorce; she also holds positions in numerous statewide associations related to her field. She credits her successes to "working her rear off."

Experience. Kathryn has not had any IP feelings in six or seven years. As she has conquered more projects, she has gained more confidence in her abilities. Cecilia feels like she has gained more credibility with age. Rosie figured all of her colleagues knew more than she did when she started teaching, but her experience over the years taught her that is not true. Liz realized as time passed at her job that she could succeed at a difficult tasks even when she did not feel ready.

RQ2: Resisting Feelings of Fraudulence

The second research question ponders fraudulence and how women in leadership resist those feelings. The respondents in this study resisted their IP by turning to mentors, other women in leadership, and romantic partners. Within these relationships, our participants found (a) courage to try new things and (b) confirmation or comfort. Romantic relationships, in particular, have a large influence on impostor feelings.

Courage. Participants drew courage from mentors and romantic partners. There was very little discussion about courage from other women in leadership; it most often was drawn from relationships with mentors. Kathryn believes that a mentor shaved 10-11 years off her career as a result of the opportunities he gave her. Michelle, a university administrator, got her first break in administration when her former chair asked her to apply for the department chair position. A mentor in Tammy's graduate program persuaded her to apply for a PhD program. Barbara's first manager would discuss leadership books with her, send her to leadership workshops and offered her the opportunity to chair committees. "As you look back on it, you see people who have kind of guided you" (Barbara). Jill felt that her mentors "pushed me to do more that I was ready for, always with a good result."

Rhonda, who went to law school while she worked as a police officer, has always felt encouraged by her romantic partner to go after opportunities. He gives her confidence. Stephanie's partner urged her to pursue a nursing degree. When they met, Stephanie was driving a delivery truck. When Cecilia was unhappy at her job, her husband inspired her to take a new job and gave her permission to risk failure. Ashlee is unhappy in

her current job and her partner is always telling her to find something else. Michelle's partner helps her think of ways to reach her goals.

Confirmation or Comfort. Mentors, other women in leadership, and romantic partners all provided confirmation and comfort for our participants. Mentors often help the women where they feel they have knowledge gaps. Melissa's former boss helped her understand that she did not need to know everything when she first started her job. Kathryn has two mentors with whom she speaks nearly every day. They help her in areas in which she feels weak. Rhonda has a fellow lawyer who acts as a mentor to teach her things she did not learn in law school. Karen appreciates it when a mentor assures her that she can do something and believes in her. Brittany often second guesses herself and looks to her mom and a former professor to assure her that she is making the right decisions. Susan appreciates when her mentors take the time to not only suggest changes to her but also explain their thought processes in offering the suggestion.

Many of our respondents found confirmation or comfort from other women in leadership. Karen and Donna both made comments about how successful women recognize success in each other and look to one another for guidance and support. Susan, a college administrator, finds it helpful to talk to other women in her profession because they understand the challenges. Five women took Rosie under their wings when she started her job and they continue to check in on her. Mary works in an organization where the women will often get together for dinner. Melissa will only surround herself with women who are positive to each other.

The informants also found confirmation and comfort at home from their romantic partners. Melissa, Kathryn, and Alex all look to their partners for serious career advice. Alex's husband has been very successful at business and understands the amount of the work required for Alex to be successful in her career. Cecilia's husband brags about her accomplishments, and Betty, who is 79 years old, says her spouse has always been appreciative of her work inside and outside of the home. Tammy believes that if it were not for her mentors and her husband that she would have never gone to graduate school.

The Importance of Romantic Partners. It became very clear during the interviews that positive romantic relationships really helped resist impostor feelings for our respondents. In addition to courage, confirmation, and comfort, there were three other positive attributes that the women discussed when it came to their successful romantic relationships: (a) partners that share house responsibilities; (b) partners who were not intimidated or jealous of success; and (c) partners who had an understanding of career expectations. The women had far more expectations for their romantic partners than they did for mentors or other women in leadership.

Analysis

Most of our 29 interview respondents do not live with a constant presence of impostor feelings. It is something they did not talk about at all or discussed in the past tense during the interviews. The women that did admit to IP talked about their low self worth and the inability to give themselves credit for a job well done. Young (2011) claimed that people with IP often have high self esteem, but that was not our experience in this study. Clance and Imes (1978) and Li, Hughes, and Thu (2014) also found that IP sufferers never attribute their success to their capabilities and intelligence. On the other hand, the interviewees in our study who lacked IP made no apologies for their confidence.

The IP sufferers also felt like they lacked experience or age. As mentioned earlier in the literature review, it is well documented that people are most susceptible to feelings of IP when they are taking on a new challenge, such as a new job, a promotion, a project, or an academic degree (see Clance, 1985; Clance, Dingman, Reviere, & Stober, 1995; Harvey & Katz, 1985; Hirschfeld, 1982; Jarrett, 2010; Kets de Vries, 2005; Matthews & Clance, 1985; Young, 2011). The women in our study who lacked IP admitted that experience helped them gain confidence. Hirschfeld (1982) believed that IP feelings diminish with experience, observation, and on-the-job learning. Young (2011) said that the IP feelings never go away. It seems that many of our respondents would disagree with Young.

Clance and Imes (1978) found in the very first empirical study regarding IP that sufferers need validation of their abilities, talents, and intelligence in order to combat feelings of fraudulence. In a 2009 magazine article, Kaplan suggested IP sufferers should talk through their feelings with supportive and understanding mentors, partners, and friends. The advice was in a small box on the last page of the article, but our research suggests that perhaps that advice should be more prominent. The respondents in this study resisted fraudulence through their relationships with mentors, other women in leadership, and romantic partners. These are the people who give them courage, comfort, and confirmation. Not surprisingly, the scholars in the discipline of psychology (where most of the IP research has been conducted) have focused on the intrapersonal aspects of the phenomenon and the early familial relationships that could have caused the fraudulent feelings. They have often prescribed counseling as the way to combat IP. This research suggests that perhaps healthy relationships with mentors, other women in leadership, and romantic partners could also help resist feelings of professional fraudulence.

When looking at the respondents' CIPS scores, the nine women who scored "frequent" or "intense" for impostor feelings become explainable in light of this analysis combined with previous research done in the field of psychology. Three of the women are starting new jobs and one of them is starting a PhD program. It is well documented that new challenges cause IP feelings (see Clance, 1985). The other women have problems in their relationships. Lisa, who scored "intense," is in a male-

dominated field and has had negative experiences with male mentors. Donna, who is divorced, does not currently have the support of a romantic partner. Angela is married, but during her interview, she never shared anything that made it sound like her husband offers her courage, comfort, or confirmation. Neither Rose nor Mona talked much about female support in their lives. Researchers (see Clance, 1985 and Matthews & Clance, 1985) have pointed out how relieved women are when they find out that other women suffer from impostor feelings. After Mona took the CIPS, she sent this email to the first author:

“Interesting survey. I was surprised at my answers and didn't know other women felt the same way.” She might have known if she had relationships with women in leadership.

Limitations & Future Research

In this research design, the phrasing of the initial online survey was ambiguous. For example, the question about IP was phrased: “High achieving women can't seem to shake the sense that they will be found out for who they really are—imposters with limited skills or abilities.” The participants could interpret the question to be about women in general or the participant's experiences specifically. This vagueness in phrasing could make the survey impersonal to the participants. Additionally, the study's initial focus was on women in leadership positions and their reaction to *Lean In*, and did not focus specifically on the IP until qualitative interviews were conducted. This lack of initial focus could limit the depth of information regarding IP from participants.

In this study, there was a reliance on recall data regarding relationships with mentors, romantic partners, and women in leadership. In the future, it could be fruitful to capture dialogue in real time between the women in leadership and members of their support team. An additional artifact for triangulation could be journals kept by the informants and/or her mentors, romantic partners, other women in leaderships, and/or members of the families of origin.

Future research could focus more on communication in families of origin and the development of IP feelings. There is a plethora of psychological research that indicates its importance, but there is a gap in communication research. Respondents in this study did not mention members of their families of origin, but there were also no prompts in the survey or interview protocols. Expanding on their importance could be another insightful clue to the development of IP.

Additionally, the women in our study that did not have IP feelings also had the ability to set clear goals and to seek out leadership opportunities—two characteristics that lead to career advancement. The women in our study with impostor feelings had a history of struggling with job promotions and communicating honestly with coworkers. None of these ideas have been thoroughly explored in the IP literature but lend well to the areas of organizational communication, leadership communication, and interpersonal communication.

Conclusion

It was discovered from this research that the majority of the 29 women in this study do not experience IP (AKA internal barriers) as frequently as one might think after reading *Lean In*. The implications indicate that a woman who is feeling like an impostor in her work environment should seek out a supportive mentor, romantic partner, and/or other women in leadership to talk through her feelings. These relationships can help her gain confidence, set goals, seek opportunities, and gain experience.

The resurgence of IP in popular literature through Sandberg's *Lean In* has allowed a new generation to realize they are not alone in their fraudulent feelings. Hopefully, this resurgence will only continue to grow until women also realize they are allowed to resist and defeat the Impostor Phenomenon.

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