Article

Addressing the Elephant in the Room: Exploring the Impostor Phenomenon in Evaluation

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Abstract

The impostor phenomenon is a psychological construct referring to a range of negative emotions associated with a person's perception of their own "fraudulent competence" in a field or of their lack of skills necessary to be successful in that field. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many practicing evaluators have experienced impostor feelings, but lack a framework in which to understand their experiences and the forums in which to discuss them. This paper summarizes the literature on the impostor phenomenon, applies it to the field of evaluation, and describes the results of an empirical, quantitatively focused study which included open-ended qualitative questions exploring impostorism in 323 practicing evaluators. The results suggest that impostor phenomenon in evaluators consists of three constructs: Discount, Luck, and Fake. Qualitative data analysis suggests differential coping strategies for men and women. Thematic analysis guided the development of a set of proposed solutions to help lessen the phenomenon's detrimental effects for evaluators.

The impostor phenomenon is defined as an internal emotional negative state centered on feelings of uncertainty, inadequacy, incapability or as a belief of inadequacy and incompetence, resulting in a fear of being exposed as a fraud in spite of evidence to the contrary (Clance, 1985; Clance & Imes, 1978). With no physical or cultural boundaries, the phenomenon impacts people across countries (Chae, Piedmont, Estadt, & Wicks, 1995; Mattie, Gietzen, Davis, & Prata, 2008; Nakazwe-Masiya, Price, & Hofmeyr, 2017), ages (Caselman, Self, & Self, 2006; Lane, 2015; Christensen et al., 2016), sexes (Clance & Imes, 1978; Gibson-Beverly & Schwartz, 2008;

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Aubeeluck, Stacey, & Stupple, 2016; Badawy, Gazdag, Bentley, & Brouer, 2018), ethnicities (Bernard & Neblett, 2018; Stone et al., 2018; Cokley, McClain, Enciso, & Martinez, 2013; Bernard, Lige, Willis, Sosoo, & Neblett, 2017), and education levels (King & Cooley, 1995; Gibson-Beverly & Schwartz, 2008; Craddock, Birnbaum, Rodriguez, Cobb, & Zeeh, 2011; Peteet, Montgomery, & Weekes, 2015). The phenomenon's construct has specific mediating and moderating variables, resulting in a predictable constellation of negative and self-defeating behaviors in both personal and professional contexts, and leading to negative, self-reinforcing conditions including depression (Ross, Stewart, Mugge, & Fultz, 2001; McGregor, Gee, & Posey, 2008), general anxiety (Murphy, Gray, Sterling, Reeves, & DuCette, 2009; Kumar & Jagacinski, 2006; Hutchins, Penney, & Sublett, 2018), social anxiety (Clance, Dingman, Reviere, & Stober, 1995), self-handicapping, and dysphoric mood disorder.

Feelings of being an impostor can be activated by a person, place, thing, or interaction/exchange (Vergauwe, Wille, Feys, De Fruyt, & Anseel, 2015; Leary, Patton, Orlando, & Wagoner Funk, 2000) or can be a continuously experienced general malaise. The identification, discussion, and treatment of the impostor phenomenon is difficult, because what is triggering for one person might be non-reactive/inert for another. What is consistent, however, is that it has an element of comparison, the source of which can be internal/intra-personal (i.e., "I should be doing better at this task; if I cannot, I must be a fraud"), or external/inter-personal—between the self and another person, an environment, or a situation. The intra-personal version is often the result of comparing the self with an unclear ideal (Collins, 1996), leading to a feeling of phoniness. This is prominent in competitive environments and based on upwards or downwards social comparisons (Simmons, 2016; Ferrari & Thompson, 2006). Studies, however, do not conceptually differentiate between respondents who continuously feel like impostors (chronic) and those who episodically experience the phenomenon during specific circumstances and events.

Feelings of being an impostor are common in the workplace (Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016); research suggests that nearly 70% of people feel like impostors during some part of their career (Gravois, 2007), regardless of their disciplinary home (e.g., Vergauwe et al., 2015; Hiebert, 2017; Crawford, Shanine, Whitman, & Kacmar, 2016; Hellman & Caselman, 2004; Clark, Vardeman, & Barba, 2014). People who strongly experience the phenomenon in the workplace often attribute their success to luck, error, or benign outside forces, and are emotionally and cognitively preoccupied with fears of being discovered and exposed as incompetent (Filarowska & Schier, 2018). Because the phenomenon is a negative emotional state, people will generally try to conceal its presence and effects, especially in the workplace, by developing and maintaining exaggerated protective behaviors and personas. Archetypal examples include the *Perfectionist* (who cannot let something move forward until it is perfect), the *Superman* (the one person who can handle every task and save the team), the *Natural Genius* (who demonstrates mastery without seeming to do any work), the *Rugged Individualist* (who only works alone), and the *Expert* (the person who knows it all) (Clance, 1985; Young, 2011). Adopting such a persona allow the person to project a sense of authority and confidence beyond their means, and dismiss any failures as indicating that an endeavor was far beyond their—or anyone else's—real ability to deliver.

Existing Models of Impostor Phenomenon

The impostor phenomenon is usually measured through the Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (Clance, 1985). The original measure consists of 20 items organized around three interrelated factors: *Fake* (self-doubts about one's own intelligence and abilities), *Luck* (the tendency to attribute success to chance/luck), and *Discount* (the inability to admit a good performance; Clance, 1985). This scale has been researched widely worldwide and in different languages, and much evidence exists for the psychometric properties of the factors, tested through convergent, discriminant, and

nomological validity studies (Chrisman, Pieper, Clance, Holland, & Glickauf-Hughes, 1995). Researchers, however, continue to debate alternative interpretations of the data with different numbers of factors (French, Ullrich-French, & Follman, 2008).

Impostors in Evaluation

Discussions with evaluation scholars and practitioners at conferences, meetings, and workplaces suggest that many evaluators relate to feeling like an impostor. There are several reasons why this might be so. First, many practicing evaluators "fall into" evaluation or find themselves assigned an evaluative role for a project or organization (Christie, 2003). These "accidental evaluators" can find themselves practicing evaluation without knowing its rich history, major debates, schisms, or the epistemological, ontological, axiological, and methodological assumptions upon which the field was built (Shadish, Cook, & Leviton, 1991). Subsequent exposure to these topics, while valuable, can lead to implicit comparisons and feeling that "I should know all of this; what else don't I know?"

Second, there are many different conceptualizations of evaluation. Some scholars argue that evaluation is a transdiscipline (Scriven, 2003), others position it as a research tool or methodological approach (Rossi & Freeman, 1993), and others see it as a professional ethos or worldview (Schwandt, 2017). The jostling between these perspectives and identities can distract from the professional practice of evaluation, itself far removed from most peoples' idea of evaluation (e.g., informally evaluating foods, products, and ideas). This disconnect between novel and familiar might lead some evaluators to discount the importance of their own skills and processes, making them wonder what missing elements would make them feel well-prepared and competent.

Third, most evaluators draw from a common pool of approaches and tools for addressing important questions. These are used in a range of contexts, such as education, health, governance, industry, and human welfare (American Evaluation Association [AEA], 2018a; Dewey, Montrosse, Schröter, Sullins, & Mattox, 2008), to examine program antecedents, processes, and outcomes, which often include changes in constructs such as attitude, affect, behavior, and status (LaVelle & Dighe, 2020). This can lead stakeholders to perceive evaluators as "only" methodological experts rather than as practitioners and representatives of a distinct professional discipline (Mathison, 2008) with its own ethos (Schwandt, 2017) and ethical premises (Morris, 2007).

The confluence of these factors can lead evaluators to feel a sense of non-belonging. Students and professionals alike have wondered "who are we to call ourselves evaluators? What do we know about making judgments of merit, worth, and significance? Surely there is someone better qualified." This reflects the essence of impostor feelings. We suggest calling this emotional state the *evaluator impostor phenomenon*.

Although the impostor phenomenon has been studied in other disciplines and work contexts, it has not been addressed in people professionally identifying as evaluators. The phenomenon's antecedents and consequences, however, directly relate to professional evaluation practice and the competencies espoused by professional evaluation associations. The AEA, for example, recently ratified an official taxonomy of evaluator competencies, including (1) Professional Practice, (2) Methodology, (3) Context, (4) Planning and Management, and (5) Interpersonal [competence] (AEA, 2018b; King & Stevahn, 2020). The impostor phenomenon in an evaluator could lead to real or perceived deteriorated performance across a number of competencies, in ways both overt and subtle. AEA competencies call for evaluators to articulate their individual perspectives and areas for growth (1.6); design sound, credible, and feasible studies addressing evaluation purposes and questions (2.7); and negotiate and manage a reasonable evaluation plan, budget, resources, and timeline (4.4). The impostor phenomenon can influence all of these and more because it affects an evaluators' sense of what is reasonable in the context of their work.

In response to this hypothesized influence, information about the phenomenon could inform pre-service evaluator education programs, both formal and informal, and help learners prepare for the uncertainties of practice in a shifting socio-political environment. Evaluation practice necessarily involves negotiating and clarifying points of confusion and uncertainty, and discussing topics and disciplines an evaluator might not have mastered. The evaluator must understand with what they do and do not know, and we believe this space of negotiation and internal/external comparison provides a nesting place for the evaluator impostor phenomenon.

Purpose of the Study

This study sought to gain a broad understanding of the impostor phenomenon in individuals who identify as evaluators, to explore the phenomenon's factor structure in evaluators, and to understand evaluators' coping tools. We sought to address three main questions:

1. What are the major constructs of the impostor phenomenon in evaluators?
2. What kinds of coping mechanisms do evaluators use to handle the phenomenon?
3. How can professional associations address the phenomenon?

Method

This study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities and at Claremont Graduate University.

Participants

The data for this study was collected in between August and October 2018. Approximately 800 self-identified evaluators were invited to participate in this study through snowball sampling via social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter). An invitation via an online survey link was also emailed to a random sample of 1,000 AEA members. Of this total sample of 1800, 494 individuals agreed to participate, for an initial response rate of 27.44%; 323 completed all aspects of the impostor phenomenon and evaluator impostor phenomenon scales, for a usable response rate of 17.94%. Table 1 contrasts participant demographics with data from the 2018 AEA member scan.

Procedure

The study was programmed using the Qualtrics Survey Platform and administered to respondents via online survey. Participants were instructed to reflect on their overall or typical experience in evaluation; they were then randomly assigned to respond to either (1) the original Clance (1985) Impostor Phenomenon Measure or (2) the modified Evaluator Impostor Phenomenon Measure. All participants responded to a series of Likert-type questions (e.g., impressions of evaluation work, perceived importance of evaluation theory and methods), and open-ended questions (e.g., self-reported impostor feelings and advice for colleagues, educators, and professional associations).

Instruments

Clance Impostor Phenomenon Measure. We used Clance's (1985) impostor phenomenon survey instrument, which instructs respondents to indicate their degree of agreement/disagreement on a 5-point Likert scale on 20 items, including "I have often succeeded on a test or task even though I

Table 1. Participant Demographics by Study Condition Contrasted with 2018 AEA Member Scan Data.

Demographic Breakdowns	Evaluator-specific Scale	Clance Scale	Total	2018 AEA Member Scan[a]
Age (average)	44	42	43	[b]
Sex				
Female	124 (77.5%)	122 (74.8%)	246 (76.2%)	52%
Male	32 (20.0%)	36 (22.1%)	68 (21.1%)	38%
Other	2 (1.3%)	2 (1.2%)	4 (1.2%)	5%
Decline to State	2 (1.2%)	3 (1.7%)	5 (1.5%)	6%
Race/ethnicity				
Asian or Pacific Islander	2 (1.2%)	10 (6.1%)	12 (3.7%)	6%
Black or African American	10 (6.3%)	4 (2.5%)	14 (4.4%)	8%
Hispanic or Latino	3 (1.9%)	10 (6.1%)	13 (4.0%)	5%
Native American/AI	2 (1.3%)	1 (0.6%)	3 (1.0%)	1%
White or Caucasian	126 (78.8%)	126 (77.3%)	252 (78.0%)	52%
Other	8 (5.0%)	9 (5.5%)	17 (5.2%)	26%
Decline to State	9 (5.5%)	3 (1.9%)	12 (3.7%)	[b]
Highest level of education				
Bachelor's degree	7 (4.4%)	6 (3.7%)	13 (4.0%)	[b]
Master's degree	83 (51.9%)	81 (49.7%)	164 (50.8%)	[b]
Advanced graduate or PhD	70 (43.7%)	76 (46.6%)	146 (45.2%)	[b]
Currently a graduate student				
No	139 (86.8%)	132 (81.0%)	271 (83.9%)	85%
Yes	21 (13.2%)	31 (19.0%)	52 (16.1%)	11%

Note. [a]Data is from the AEA Member Survey Report (2018); raw numbers not available.
[b]Data not reported in AEA Member Survey Report (2018).

was afraid that I would not do well before I undertook the task" and "I can give the impression that I'm more competent than I really am."

Evaluator-Specific Impostor Phenomenon Measure. The Evaluator Impostor Phenomenon Measure was adapted from the Clance scale to make it specific to evaluators (e.g., "I avoid evaluations of my own evaluation work if possible") and to address lengthy or double-barreled questions in the original measure. Participants responded to 23 Likert-type items. We used only positively worded items to avoid a method-induced bias of reverse-coded items (Carlson et al., 2011; Marsh, 1996).

Impressions of Evaluation Work. To address perceptions of evaluation work, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the statements: (1) "Anyone can do evaluation work" and (2) "There is no special knowledge that you need to do evaluation work" using a 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) scale.

Importance of Evaluation Aspects. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of knowledge, from 1 (Not important at all) to 5 (Essential), on several aspects of evaluation, including theory, practice, inquiry/methodology, ethics, program context, planning and management, and interpersonal skills.

Individual Impostor Feelings. Respondents were asked to reflect on their personal experiences of feeling like a fake or impostor while participating in or leading an evaluation process. Participants used a 1-to-5 scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree) to indicate agreement with the following statements: (1) "In general, I feel like a 'fake' or an 'impostor' in my evaluation work," and (2) "Feelings of being a 'fake' or an 'impostor' have led me to consider other career paths."

Participants were also asked to indicate the percentage of time, from 0% to 100%, in which they feel like an "impostor" or "fake" when conducting their evaluation work, and to indicate the severity of these feelings on a Likert-type scale from 1 (Trivial) to 5 (Severe). Several open-ended questions were also presented, proceeded by a prompt reading: "Feelings of being a 'fake' or an 'impostor' can happen to anyone, in any profession, and the experience is more common that most people realize. For the next questions, think about a time in your evaluation work where you really felt like a 'fake' or an 'impostor.'" Participants were asked to explain how they handled their feelings, and what they wished others understood about their experience, and were asked to describe what they wished professional evaluation associations, evaluator educators, and junior/new evaluators knew about the experience of feeling like an impostor.

Analytical Procedures

This study collected both quantitative and qualitative data to answer the research questions using a single survey instrument. Quantitative data was emphasized, with qualitative data acting as a supplement. Individual research questions were addressed by the different data strands, and the data were not integrated in the study.

Quantitative Analysis. We used SPSS v25 to analyze the quantitative data, and analyzed the data for the two groups independently. For the original group, we scored the data using procedures recommended by Clance (1985), then described it using descriptive statistics.

For the evaluator-specific impostor phenomenon scale, we examined the data using basic descriptive statistics, then analyzed the number of participants in comparison to the number of items to be sure the data supported exploratory factor analysis (EFA) (MacCallum, Widaman, Zhang, & Hong, 1999). With these data including responses from 160 subjects on a 23-item instrument, our sample size and subject-variable ratio indicated sufficient statistical power for EFA analysis.

For our initial 23-item, evaluator-specific scale, we conducted the EFA using principal axis factoring (PAF) with oblique rotation to identify latent factors. Factor extraction was guided by analysis of a scree plot, factors with eigenvalues greater than one, and theoretical expertise of impostor phenomenon. Items with high cross-loadings (i.e., < .40) on other hypothesized factors, or low factor loadings on its specific factor (< .32; DeVellis, 2017; Yong & Pearce, 2013), were removed. Only items loading onto one factor and possessing high loadings (> .50) were retained. Factor scores were created by using an unweighted average of the high loading variables for each subfactor.

Qualitative Analysis. We performed content analyses on the qualitative data to identify salient patterns in responses across study conditions. Researchers first used an open coding process, with themes emerging organically without a priori themes or codes (Straus & Corbin, 1990). Themes and codes were then reviewed and consolidated through team member discussions, and final themes were organized and analyzed inductively; code titles reflected participant language. Themes were contextualized within the framework of previous literature on impostor phenomenon coping (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017) and quantitized according to emergent themes to convey the theme's pervasiveness among participants (Creswell & Clark, 2011). A quantitative measure for inter-rater reliability was not used, as the codes used by the team aligned closely with words used by participants.

Results

Results of our data analyses include (1) how we addressed missing data, and results of the analyses conducted on the original impostor phenomenon measure; (2) how we explored the data on the evaluation-specific measure; (3) results of questions presented to all participants regarding their impressions of evaluation work and their self-assessment of the impostor phenomenon in their

lives; and (4) analysis of the qualitative data regarding coping strategies and recommendations for professional associations.

Missing Data Analysis

Preliminary data cleaning removed participants not completing a majority of the scale items (80%) or with extreme response time (measured in seconds), or showing evidence of longstring, invariant responding (DeSimone, Harms, & DeSimone, 2015). Our analysis revealed no missing cases on the consent form, response time, or invariance responding.

Analysis of Data from Clance Impostor Phenomenon Measure

We first analyzed the data using the factor structures proposed by Clance and Imes's (1978) model of the impostor phenomenon. Participants' scores on the overall measure ranged from 1.25 to 4.5 ($M =$ 3.01, $SD = 0.72$). They scored between 1 and 5 on each of the impostor phenomenon subscales: Luck ($M = 2.81$, $SD = 1.13$), Discount ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 0.77$), and Fake ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 0.73$). Between each of the Clance scales, the data exhibited medium to strong positive correlations, and subscales all exhibited strong positive correlations ($> .50$). Findings supported a strong positive relationship between Luck and Fake, $r(163) = 0.69$, $p < .001$. Discount had a strong positive relationship with Luck $r(163) = 0.56$, $p < .001$ and with Fake $r(163) = 0.79$, $p < .001$. Together, these factors explained 54% of the variance in impostor phenomenon using the Clance measure and its analysis procedures.

Demographics Differences on the Clance Measure

The analysis indicated sex differences on the original scale, with female evaluators ($M = 3.05$, $SD =$ 0.72) having statistically higher impostor characteristics than males ($M = 2.77$, $SD = 0.65$), $t(156) =$ 2.20, $p = .029$. Analyses did not find statistically significant differences between age and educational attainment.

Analysis of Data from the Evaluator Impostor Phenomenon Measure: EFA

Prior to performing the EFA, we assessed the suitability of the data for factor analysis and found no issues with multicollinearity between the variables. The final sample for this EFA included 160 participants. We first compared two-factor and three-factor structures based on existing impostor phenomenon models. Model fit comparisons with chi-square and BIC fit indices revealed that the three-factor model best fit the data ($\Delta\chi = 97.89$, $\Delta df = 20$, $p < .01$, $\Delta BIC = 4.94$).

The three-factor solution emerged containing one item with a marginally high-cross loading (e.g., 0.47), and two with low factor-loading coefficients: "Stakeholders tend to think I know more about evaluation than I really do," "I avoid evaluations of my own work if possible," and "I have a dread of others judging my evaluation work." Five items with communalities $< .55$ were dropped (Costello & Osbourne, 2005). Table 2 shows that three components explained 58.89% of the variance.

We performed a second round of EFA with the remaining 15 items, extracting 10 that exhibited excellent factor loadings $> .45$, no cross-loadings, and superior construct validity based on previous research on impostor phenomenon. This three-factor solution (Table 3) explained 62% of the variance, and descriptive fit indices indicated good fit ($RMSR = 0.03$; $RMSEA = 0.08$; $BIC = -190.76$; $TLI = 0.93$). The Cronbach's Alpha for each subscale was acceptable: Discount (alpha $= .86$), Luck (alpha $= .78$), and Fake (alpha $= .82$).

Table 2. Pre-Rotation Total Variance Explained (EFA) in Participants Responding to the Online Evaluator Impostor Phenomenon Scale (2018).

Factor	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings
	Total	% of variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of variance	Cumulative %	Total
1	9.90	44.99	44.99	9.53	43.31	43.30	7.29
2	1.91	8.69	53.68	1.54	7.01	50.32	3.91
3	1.15	5.22	58.89	.69	3.17	53.49	3.09
4	1.11	5.06	63.96	.68	3.11	56.60	5.48
5	1.02	4.62	68.58	.61	2.77	59.38	6.19
6	.921	4.19	72.77				

Extraction method: principal axis factoring.

Table 3. Factor Loadings and Communalities of 10 Evaluator-Specific Impostor Phenomenon Items in the Final EFA Model.

Item	Factor		
	Discount	Luck	Fake
5: When people praise me for something I've accomplished in evaluation, I'm afraid I won't be able to live up to their expectations of me in the future.	**0.83**	0.03	−0.01
17: When I receive recognition for my accomplishments, I have doubts that I can keep repeating that success.	**0.77**	0.07	0.02
1: I have often succeeded in my evaluation work even though I was afraid that I would not do well before I undertook the project.	**0.76**	−0.06	−0.11
18: If I receive praise and recognition for an evaluation project, I tend to discount the importance of what I've done or contributed.	**0.69**	0.05	0.10
6: I sometimes think I got to where I am in my evaluation career because I happened to be in the right place at the right time or knew the right people.	0	**0.87**	0
12: At times, I feel my success has been due to some kind of luck.	0.02	**0.83**	0
10: Sometimes I feel or believe that my success in my evaluation career has been the result of some kind of error.	0.31	**0.46**	0.09
8: I tend to remember evaluations in which I have not done my best more than those times I have done my best.	−0.07	0.04	**0.85**
9: I rarely do an evaluation, or my part of an evaluation, as well as I'd like to do it.	0.09	0	**0.72**
13: I'm disappointed at times in my present accomplishments and think I should have accomplished much more.	0.39	−0.18	**0.47**

Evaluator Impostor Phenomenon: Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics suggest that respondents exhibited a range of responses on each of the evaluator-specific scales and subscales. Scores on the scale ranged from 1 to 4.60 ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 0.82$), and between 1 and 5 on each evaluation-specific subscale: Luck ($M = 2.44$, $SD = 1.00$), Discount ($M = 2.72$, $SD = 0.99$), and Fake ($M = 2.84$, $SD = 1.02$). Each subscale exhibited medium to strong positive correlations ($> .39$). Findings supported a medium positive relationship between Luck and Fake, $r(155) = 0.40$, $p < .001$. Discount had a medium positive relationship with Luck $r(155) = 0.50$, $p < .001$ and a strong positive relationship with Fake $r(155) = .61$, $p < .001$.

Evaluator Impostor Phenomenon: Relationships and Differences Based on Evaluator Demographics

We used Pearson's correlation to assess the relationship between age and each scale. We found a negative relationship between age and Discount (r[152] = −.30, p < .01), Fake (r[152] = −.18, p < .05), and Luck (r[152] = −.32, p < .01). As evaluator age increased, feelings of the impostor phenomenon sub-constructs decreased. We found no statistically significant differences between men and women in the evaluator-specific scales, and no significant differences related to educational attainment.

Impressions of Evaluation Work

Ratings for perceptions demonstrated that respondents disagreed with the statements that (1) "Anyone can do evaluation work" (M = 1.49, SD = 0.775), and (2) "There is no special knowledge that you need to do evaluation work" (M = 2.29, SD = 1.19) on a scale where 1 indicated strong disagreement and 5 indicated strong agreement.

Importance of Evaluation Aspects

Rating the level of importance of knowledge on several aspects of evaluation from 1 (Not important at all) to 5 (Essential), respondents found ethics most important (M = 4.6, SD = .696), followed by inquiry/methodology (M = 4.58, SD = .619), evaluation practice (M = 4.55, SD = .586), interpersonal skills (M = 4.53, SD = .702), program context (M = 4.5, SD = .696), evaluation planning and management (M = 4.34, SD = .736), and evaluation theory (M = 3.82, SD = .967).

Impostor Feelings

While respondents indicated that on average they do not feel like a "fake" or "impostor" in their evaluation work (M = 2.29, SD = 1.19), nor have these feelings led them to consider other careers (M = 1.97, SD = 1.22), they reported feeling like an "impostor" or "fake" when conducting their evaluation work 34.5% of the time (SD = 25.70). When rating the severity of these feelings, respondents indicated that they were often moderate (M = 3.08, SD = 1.40).

Coping Responses

In addition to noting the percentage of time they have felt like an impostor in their evaluation work and the severity of those feelings, respondents were asked to describe how they handle those feelings. Table 4 presents responses, with accompanying exemplar quotes. Respondents report utilizing more than one coping response, with "conducting more research" (i.e., actively learning more about a certain topic) the most common response. We noted differences in coping responses by sex; female respondents tended to describe more active coping approaches (e.g., seeking support from others, engaging in positive-self talk, and focusing on past/other accomplishments) compared to males, who more frequently described avoidant coping approaches (e.g., working harder, ignoring/avoiding feelings, not acknowledging impostor feelings).

Suggestions for Professional Associations

A minority of respondents felt that it is not the responsibility of a professional association to address issues of impostor feelings. As one stated, "'Feelings' are a personal matter for me and I don't like professional associations trying to mess with my personal feelings … AEA should stay out of trying

Table 4. Coping Responses Themes by Sex, and Exemplar Quotes.

Coping Mechanism Used	% of Comments			Exemplar Quote
	Total	Women	Men	
Conduct More Research	17%	18%	14%	"I try to do lots of research and learning so that I know as much as I can about the situation or lack of skill set that gives me the feeling of being an impostor."
Talk to others	11%	12%	9%	"Talk to other colleagues, but now that I'm not working in an evaluation & research team anymore, I spend more time doubting my knowledge and skill."
Focus on past accomplishments	10%	10%	5%	"I remind myself of similar situations, how well I was able to manage them and how satisfied others were with my work. I also remind myself of how many repeat clients I have and how that reflects their level of satisfaction with my work."
Work harder	9%	7%	11%	"Work harder. Practice and plan talking points before an upcoming meeting or conversation. Talk less in situations so I don't say the wrong thing and get found out."
Ignore/avoid feelings/avoid situations where this happens	9%	9%	14%	"Repress them for the most part. As an evaluator in the consulting world, there's often this misconception among clients that we evaluators have a magic bullet that will solve their problems and answer all their questions."
Don't have those feelings	7%	6%	13%	"I have never had feelings of being a "fake" or an "impostor." If I take on a project that involves doing things I'm not entirely sure how to do, I learn more about it—and typically master it—through reading and consulting with others who are competent in that area. NEVER, EVER is there a reason to feel a fake or imposter"
Positive self-talk	7%	8%	3%	"I tell myself it's normal to have such feelings. I tell myself that I do good work, even if I don't know X."
"Fake it till you make it"	4%	5%	2%	"I often live by the mantra, "fake it to make it." As such, when I feel like an impostor, due to my status as a doctoral student and evaluation/ emerging evaluation professional, I just grin and bear it. I engage in positive self-talk, surround myself with others who I deem to be credible, and put forth my best efforts."
I'm an expert/remind myself I have training	4%	4%	3%	Remind myself of my competencies, experiences, and knowledge. While I may not know everything, I bring valuable insights to the table. I also remind myself of the importance of being authentic and humble over knowing everything.
Acknowledge and examine feelings	2%	2%	2%	"I try to check my feelings and identify what might be the underlying issues."
Comparison to others	2%	2%	2%	"Remind myself that most people know little to nothing about evaluation, so I am typically the

Table 4. Continued.

Coping Mechanism Used	% of Comments			Exemplar Quote
	Total	Women	Men	
Other	7%	6%	8%	most knowledgeable person in the room with stakeholders. Any impostor syndrome issues show up when I interact with peers at AEA." "Normally when I have feelings of being a "fake" or an "impostor" I try to take some cleansing breaths to help with those feelings."
No response	12%	11%	16%	N/A

Note. Due to the open-ended nature of the above question, some responses included content that fit within more than one category. Additionally, those who did not identify in binary sex terms were not included in the table, as to maintain their confidentiality (a small number of participants identified as non-binary, or declined to state their sex). As such, percentages may not sum to 100%.

Table 5. Suggested Strategies for Organizations to Address Impostor Feelings.

Strategy	Exemplar Quote
Normalization	"Simply get the word out that 'impostor syndrome' is a thing, especially for people new to the field. My graduate program had a seminar at the beginning of the program that addressed this topic, and it made me feel better just to know that other people also felt that way and that it was normal. As a young professional I have been able to carry that lesson with me and I think I have struggled less with those feelings in my professional career because of it."
Mentorship	"Share true stories of evaluators who've had these feelings—in what context, when in their careers, and how they got through it … Setting up mentor-mentee relationships via the evaluation association would be helpful as well. For example, creating a mentor program and evaluators can sign up to be a mentor or mentee, or helping local evaluation chapters to set up similar programs."
Socialization into the community	"Open dialogue about how the field culture may be contributing to practitioners experiencing impostor syndrome. Assess what narratives and messages are being shared among the field on expected professionalism and competence."
Communities of practice/ support systems	"Create more evaluation collaborations, support groups, ways that evaluators can work together, a community of practice."

to address anyone's personal feelings of this sort." The overwhelming majority of participants, however, suggested multiple strategies for the profession to address the issue. Suggestions clustered into four areas: the normalization of these feelings, mentorship, socialization into the evaluation community, and the provision or establishment of communities of practice (Table 5).

Several participants also highlighted current efforts by professional associations and the benefit they provide. As one described,

I think organizations like AEA are already doing things to help. For example, AEA offers a plethora of professional development opportunities to help evaluators who want to build their skill sets. AEA also

offers the annual conference and Summer Institute. Both events have helped me to meet other evaluators and realize that many of us struggle with the same issues.

Other respondents expressed concerns about normalizing impostor feelings, stating that professional associations could "Talk about it without legitimizing bad work." Others suggested that professional associations should acknowledge

that there is a certain personality that tends to seek out this type of work. I think at times we are more humble than some researchers, we know that we don't know it all, and sometimes this manifests as feeling like an impostor.

Still other respondents viewed it as a systemic issue, explaining,

I think the culture of higher education needs to be altered to a more realistic understanding of what is humanly possible. It is not possible for a student to be expected to read every evaluation textbook and article out there and constantly stay up on contemporary debates. Between peer reviewed journals, blogs, EVALTALK, conferences, and Twitter there is just isn't enough time to consume all of this information. The academic institution needs to re-evaluate how it encourages evaluators to become more knowledgeable in their areas of interest and stop using shame as a motivator.

Discussion

Our data suggest that, although most respondents would not be clinically classified as having intense impostor feelings, a number self-identified as impostors, scored highly on the scales, or identified with episodic aspects of the impostor phenomenon. This supports Gravois' previous work (2007) suggesting that approximately 70% of workers felt like impostors at some point in their working life. One limitation of both the current study and Gravois' is that they did not explicitly differentiate between chronic and episodic impostors. It is possible that the topic motivated people with impostor phenomenon to self-select to participate in the study, though the observed proportion of the phenomenon in this study is comparable to what is found in other types of work. In addition, earlier research suggested that the phenomenon is found in individuals and groups across a range of demographics and geographies, consistent with the current findings.

The evaluator-specific impostor phenomenon scale supports a three-factor solution, with constructs of Fake, attributing existing success to Luck, and Discounting one's own good performance. These factors explained 62% of the variance in the measure, compared with 54% of the variance explained in the Clance measure. Additional psychometric studies (e.g., French et al., 2008) are needed to further explore the conceptual and empirical structure of this phenomenon in evaluators.

The qualitative data suggest that evaluators' coping behaviors are similar to those of other populations. Similar to work by Hutchins and Rainbolt (2017), the described coping behaviors included both active and avoidant approaches. In addition, a novel theme emerged: conduct more research. This was the most frequent response (17%), and related comments alluded to an approach many evaluators would recognize: when something is unknown, learn more. Respondents often described their efforts to compensate for their felt lack of knowledge or skill in a particular area. One commented that they "try to quickly get information and knowledge on the things (methodologies, concepts, program backgrounds, etc.) that I am lacking, in order to show my ability and capability of conducting the tasks." This finding may illustrate the confluence of the several factors that can lead to impostor feelings, including the so-called accidental evaluator, the transdisciplinary nature of evaluation, the lack of a distinct professional discipline, and the lack of professional performance regulation.

Not all evaluators have engaged in formal education in evaluation, though many participate in ongoing professional development. As described by Stufflebeam (2001) and others (LaVelle & Donaldson, 2015, 2021; LaVelle & Johnson, 2021), one goal of educational opportunities in evaluation is the development and integration of knowledge and skills to help participants conduct competent, high quality, ethical practice. If available educational opportunities are not helping bolster evaluators' perceived efficacy and outcome expectations, the processes and outcomes of these experiences must be examined. We wonder if evaluator education programs (e.g., LaVelle, 2019) might explicitly include courses or experiences to address the psychology of evaluators as well as the interpersonal skills listed in AEA competency Domains 1 and 5.

The effect of sex on the impostor phenomenon seems unclear, with some studies suggesting that impostorism is more prevalent among women (Clance & Imes, 1978; Jostl, Bergsmann, Luftenegger, Schober, & Spiel, 2012; McGregor et al., 2008), and others finding no differences (Cokley et al., 2013; Cowman & Ferrari, 2002). Some studies suggest that impostorism has a more intense impact on women (Patzak, Kollmayer, & Schober, 2017). While we found no systematic sex differences, women tended to have significantly higher Clance scores than men and reported different coping strategies.

Conclusion

Recent discussions on professionalization, competencies, education, and the like tend to focus on mezzo- and macro-level perspectives, such as professional organizations and international societies. It would be beneficial for participants in such discussions to remember that individual evaluators are tasked with learning about evaluation, practicing evaluation with skill and competence, and behaving in a manner befitting an ethical professional. This study helps set the direction for future research on evaluation (Mark, 2008) as well as research on evaluators [Mark, personal communication], helping illustrate relationships among professionalization, competence, education, and the impact evaluators have in programs and organizations. The impostor phenomenon, for example, is hypothetically related to individual performance on evaluation-specific tasks, and further research might explore this relationship. As we begin to better understand the phenomenon's role within evaluation and for evaluators, future studies may address the effectiveness of coping strategies in the reduction of impostor feelings, examine the effects of these feelings on quality of life and job satisfaction, and look at other psychological/sociological/political constructs that may be relevant for understanding evaluation practice and evaluators as individuals.

A fundamental difficulty in confronting the impostor phenomenon is that many individuals suffer in solitude, unaware of how common it is. As one respondent explained, "I was surprised at how many people had the same issues, in evaluation work, as I did when I first attended an evaluation-focused conference. I thought everyone else was a 'pro' and had all the answers!" As the phenomenon's pervasiveness becomes more apparent, the issue should be brought to light and confronted head-on to diminish its power over self-guided expectations and perceptions of self-worth. With this in mind, we have attempted to describe and understand the impostor phenomenon in evaluators, the coping approaches evaluators take, and their suggestions for addressing what can be an isolating and emotionally draining state. As one participant said, "it's pretty damning that it took a bunch of researchers to make this an acceptable topic of conversation outside of hushed tones." We hope these data and this discussion speak to strategies that communities of evaluators can adopt to further illuminate this phenomenon and ameliorate its adverse effects.

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