

# The Impostor Phenomenon

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# Why this talk?

Heard about it a few months ago, in an early Club Sandwich

Started googling it.

Very popular, but mostly blog posts appear at the top of the list.

Taking a step back, and understand better what's going on.

Disclaimer: I didn't know what this talk will be about beforehand!

# Agenda

1. Historical milestones
2. The characteristics of IP
3. The impostor cycle
4. Self-esteem VS self-acceptance
5. Discussion, and provocative questions

# Introduction

## Merriam Webster

impostor, noun, im· pos· tor | \ im-'pä-stər

variants: or imposter

Definition: one that assumes false identity or title for the purpose of deception

## **Impostor Phenomenon (Clance & Imes, 1978)**

The psychological experience of believing that one's accomplishments came about not through genuine ability, but as a result of having been lucky, having worked harder than others, or having manipulated other people's impressions.

Aka: Impostor syndrome, impostorism, fraud syndrome, the impostor experience

- doubt one's own accomplishments
- despite numerous, objective success evidences
- persistent internalized fear of being exposed as a "fraud"

Widespread ~30% pop., ~70% in academia [citation needed]

## Some celebrity quotes...

“I have written eleven books, but each time I think, ‘Uh oh, they’re going to find out now. I’ve run a game on everybody, and they’re going to find me out.’”

**Award-winning author Maya Angelou**

“...somewhere, deep inside, you don’t believe what they say. You think it’s a matter of time before you stumble and ‘they’ discover the truth.”

**Former CEO of Girls, Inc. Joyce Roché**

“At any time I still expect that the no-talent police will come and arrest me.”

**Mike Myers**

“You think, ‘Why would anyone want to see me again in a movie? And I don’t know how to act anyway, so why am I doing this?’”

**Meryl Streep**

“[I would] wake up in the morning before going off to a shoot, and think, I can’t do this; I’m a fraud.”

**Kate Winslet**

“When I got to Harvard just after the release of Star Wars: Episode 1, I feared people would assume I had gotten in just for being famous, and not worthy of the intellectual rigor here.”

**Natalie Portman**

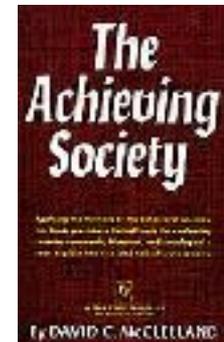
# Historical milestones



- 1938 - Henry Murray - Needs theory of personality  
Need for Achievement (nAch): an individual's desire for significant accomplishment, mastering of skills, control, or high standards

Thematic Apperception Test: tell a story based on a picture of a distinctive situation: who the people are, what they are thinking and feeling, what happened before and how it will go out

- 1961 - David C. McClelland. *The Achieving Society*  
A theory of cultural modernization  
Popularization of the nAch model  
Achievement motivation: key to understand economic progress and dvp



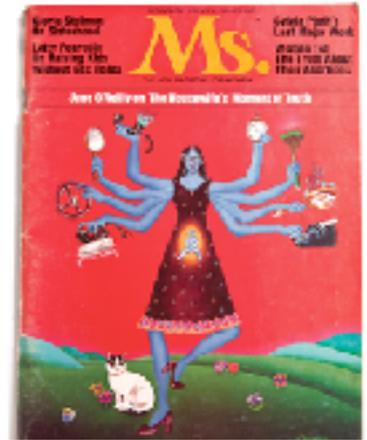
# Historical milestones

- 1971- Vivian Gornick. *Why Women Fear Success*  
Ms.: the New Magazine for Women in New York Magazine

Interview of Matina Horner, young Harvard professor of psychology

*"When I was up for my prelims, I went into a state of anxiety like nothing I'd ever known before. I carried on so I frightened my husband and finally, in desperation, he yelled at me: "For God's sake, maybe women shouldn't be in graduate school!" Now, what was I afraid of? I had designed my own prelim, I knew everything I was responsible for. There wasn't the remotest possibility of failure; and yet, I was shaking, throwing up, screaming I was stupid and now they'd all know I was stupid"*

- 1973 - Matina Horner - Fear of Success (FOS)  
Women troubled the nAch construct: higher scores, inferior "performers"  
They self-edit own drive to succeed in response to surrounding cultural imagery  
Anticipation of success: anticipation of negative consequences  
e.g. social rejection, loss of "femininity"  
Success anxiety: present in women only when achievement directly competitive  
i.e. one person's success is at the expense of another's failure



# Historical milestones

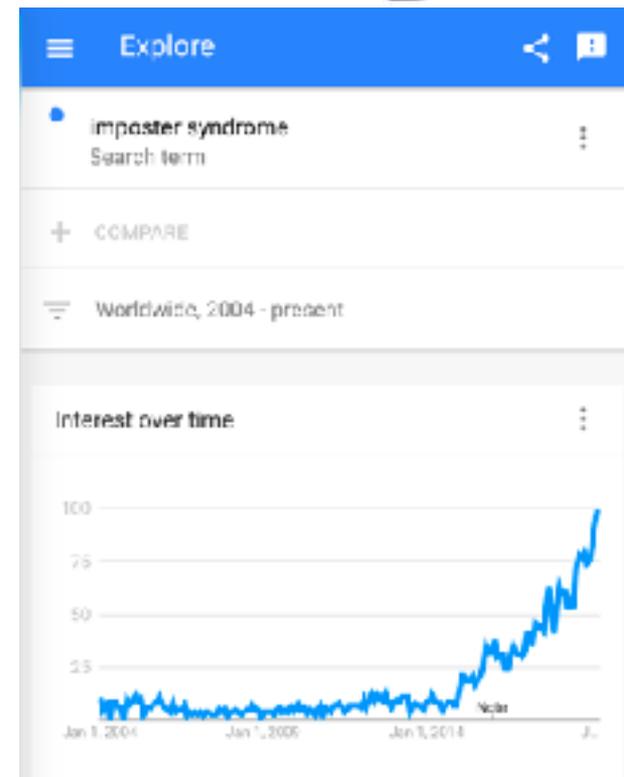
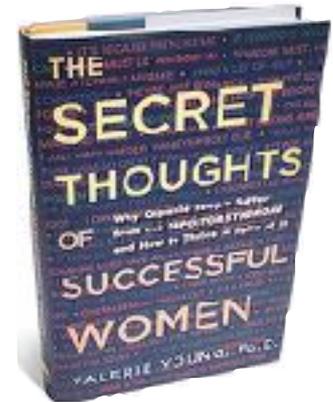
- 1978 - Pauline R. Clance, Suzanne A. Imes  
Introduction of the term Impostor Phenomenon
- 1985 - Harvey / Katz - Impostor Syndrome, Impostorism  
Specific subset of criteria
- 1985 - Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (CIP)  
The first scale designated to measure characteristics of IP
- 1991 - John Kolligian and Robert Sternberg - Perceived Fraudulence  
Fundamental fear of being unveiled
- 2005 - Kets de Vries  
Imposture in a wider sense : a normal aspect of social behavior  
Continuum from Real Imposture to Neurotic Imposture
- 2016 - Kevin Chassangre  
Validation of scales translated in French. Cognitive dimension of the phenomenon.



P. C. Clance

# Today?

- 2011 - Valerie Young  
The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women: Why Capable People Suffer from the Impostor Syndrome and How to Thrive in Spite of It.
- 2015 - Google trends clear cut
- 2018 - Elisabeth Cox TED-Ed conference



# Today?

This is the internet every time the world cup is on.



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# The characteristics of IP

*"Internal experience of intellectual phoniness" in individuals who are highly successful but unable to internalize their success*

Matthews & Clance, 1985

Six potential characteristics : minimum of two found in IP

1. The impostor cycle  
the most important one -- see next
2. The need to be special, to be the very best  
rooted in family messages -- see next
3. Superwoman/superman aspects  
perfectionistic tendency
4. Fear of failure  
explains anxiety, related to high standards
5. Denial of competence and discounting praise  
IP is not false modesty
6. Fear and guilt about success  
atypical success could lead to rejection  
success could lead to greater expectations, and therefore to unveiling

# IP - Epidemiology



## Context

Mostly professional: arts, science, humanities, media...  
All other aspects of life: parenthood, social interactions



## Age, Experience, Practice

Decrease the experience of IP, esp. in professional context  
IP seems to be persistent, and hard to overcome  
Stable personality trait ~> Transient affective state



## Gender

Initially mostly observed and studied in female individuals  
Occurrence is independent - numerous studies since 90's  
Women seems more subject to it: social stereotypes



## Culture

Minorities are more subject to it: social stereotypes  
Impact of and on acculturation

# Family backgrounds for IP

## Important impact of "bad" parental messages

- value intelligence and performance above all
- discrepancy between image conveyed by family and other entities
- no reinforcing regarding achievements
- no reinforcing regarding atypical abilities falling outside of family norms

## Social comparison

The child compares his qualities/abilities to family members  
Qualities only are reinforced

## The "social VS. bright" child (Clance&Imes, 1978)

### The "social child"

Can never prove that she is as bright as her sibling regardless of her intellectual accomplishments.

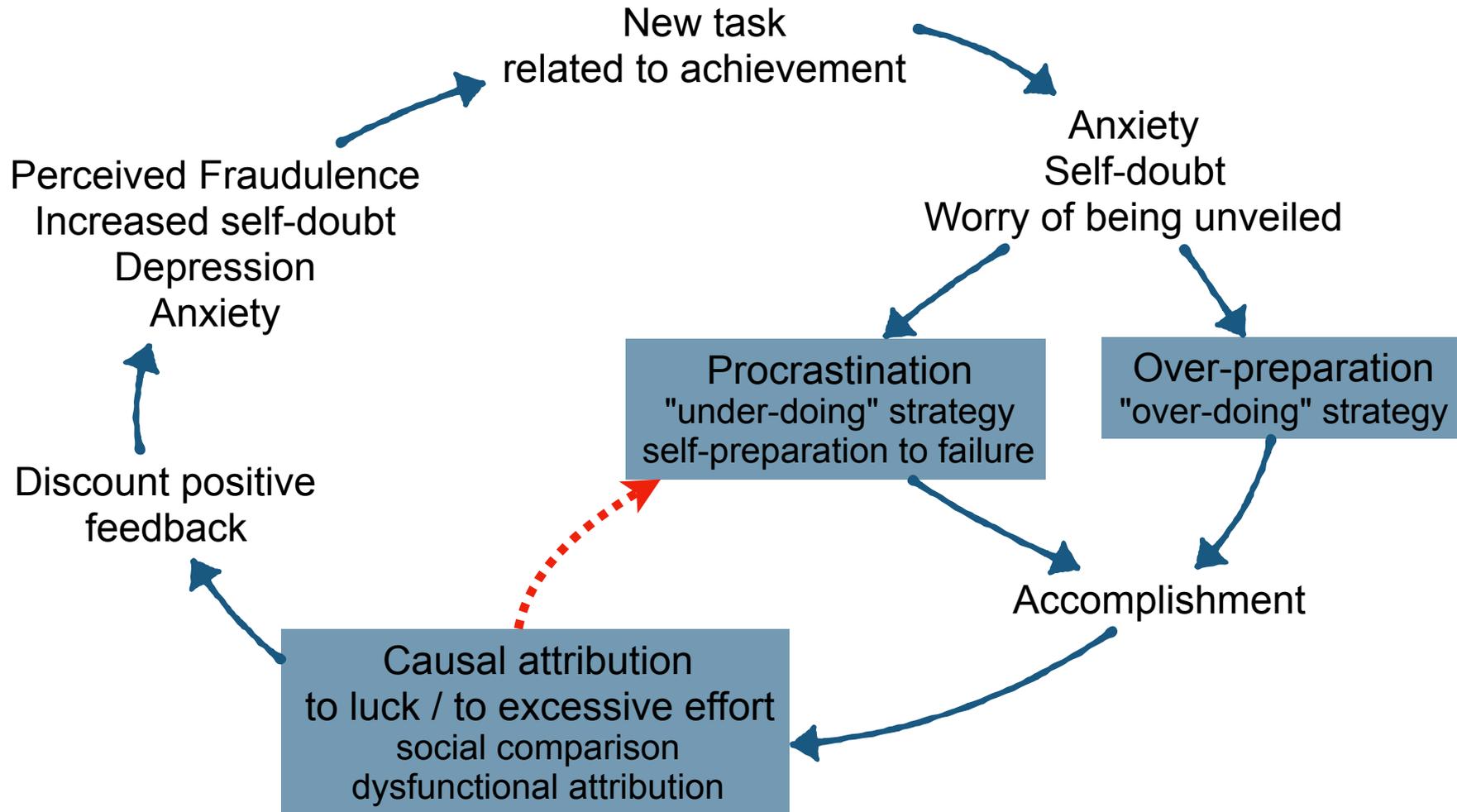
One part of her believes the family myth; another part wants to disprove it.

### The "bright child"

Realizes her skills are not as extraordinary as the family message.

Think close circle could change its mind and see her as an impostor.

# The (vicious) impostor cycle



Clance, 1985; Sakulku&Alexander, 2011; Chassangre, 2016

# Self-esteem VS self-acceptance

## Self-esteem

An evaluation system

Value judgment, subjective

Unstable trait based on own performance evaluation

## **Self-acceptance (Shepard, Ellis)**

Help coping with natural process of self-evaluation

Awareness of our strengths and weaknesses

Realistic (yet subjective) acknowledgment our own talents/abilities/worth

Satisfaction despite deficiencies, regardless of the past and the others

Self-acceptance is not resignation!

Enables improvement and evolution of individual functioning

# Recap and remarks

IP : deep roots in "pure" psychology studies ~ 40 years  
Strong links with history of feminism  
Strong interactions with performance / achievement in society

A psychological **phenomenon, not a disorder** or syndrome  
combination of cognitive and affective components

Clance & Ojerholm 1995:

*"All along it's been very important for us not to have this be another 'defect' in women or a pathologizing of women"*

Several scales to measure and diagnose.

Widespread ~30% pop., ~70% in academia [citation needed]

# Provocative questions for discussion

Speak it out, and unconditional self-acceptance.  
No magical cure.

Speak it out. But only to relevant people.

Very popular last 10 years. Has it become a business?

The urge for a cure:

- ▶ yet another injunction to performance?
- ▶ whose purpose would it serve?

*The Impostor Syndrome is a symptom of discomfort with the "Dream" (Coates 2015, 50), an insouciant sense of owning the world that characterizes the American culture of whiteness. (Dana Simmons 2016).*

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