

Imposter Syndrome and Sense of Belonging

Student perceptions of the Clance Imposter Phenomenon
Scale (CIPS): A focus group study

Background:

Imposter syndrome has become a buzzword. Recently, prevalence rates in research settings have reached anomalous levels, with some studies reporting rates of up to 82%. Additionally, students have been used in so much of the research, but little is known about how they understand the construct or the tools used to measure it. We therefore investigated student perceptions of the most popular tool for identifying imposter syndrome, the CIPS.

Aims:

- 1) Identify any differences between how students conceptualise imposter syndrome, versus the scientific community.
- 2) Investigate how students interpret the structure and wording of the CIPS.
- 3) Explore the student discourse surrounding imposter syndrome.

Methodology:

Data was collected through student-led focus groups, where participants were undergraduate students. They were sent copies of the CIPS but were unaware it was measuring imposter syndrome. They were asked what they thought the scale was measuring and how they perceived the wording and the structure of the questionnaire. They were later informed the scale was measuring imposter syndrome and subsequently discussed their opinions on the phenomenon. Transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis.

Results:

The most common constructs students associated with the questionnaire were self-doubt, self-esteem and confidence. While these concepts are all linked to imposter syndrome, the phenomenon is much more specific than any one of these individual concepts.

Participants also identified several flaws with the CIPS:

- Many felt the Likert scale didn't accurately represent their feelings, as they didn't think their feelings could be expressed quantitatively.
- Some felt the vocabulary was exclusive to students, graduates and those progressing in their careers.
- Many found the phrasing of the Likert scale and the contradictory use of time phrases confusing and hard to interpret.
- Some felt the questionnaire was culturally exclusive, for example with the inclusion of the term luck.
- Participants found the negative phrasing of the questions caused them to answer more negatively. Some felt the emotive nature of the questions prevented them from being answered objectively.

Conclusion:

We believe the large difference in how students and researchers conceptualise imposter syndrome, and that the CIPS is a weak diagnostic tool, may explain the extreme prevalence rates.