

Perfectionism And The Imposter Phenomenon Among Postgraduate Students In India

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ABSTRACT

Perfectionism is defined as “high standards of performance which are accompanied by tendencies for overly critical evaluations of one’s behaviour” (Frost et. al., 1990). Perfectionism is the tendency to strive for perfectionism and can be adaptive or maladaptive. Imposter phenomenon on the other hand, is a term that was coined by Dr. Pauline Clance and can be described as a feeling or psychological experience of having the belief or assumption that the individual is not accomplished due to his own ability but due to certain external forces not related to one’s genuine ability such as luck or manipulation. The aim of this study was to study the relationship between perfectionism and the imposter phenomenon and between the various dimensions of perfectionism and the imposter phenomenon among Indian postgraduate students. The study consisted of a sample of 189 students and the scales used in the study were the Hewitt & Flett Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (Hewitt & Flett, 1991) and the Clance Imposter Phenomenon Scale (Clance, 1985). The results indicated that there was a significant positive relationship between perfectionism and the imposter phenomenon. The results of the study also indicated that socially prescribed perfectionism had the strongest correlation with imposter phenomenon.

Keywords: Perfectionism; Socially prescribed perfectionism; Other oriented perfectionism; Self oriented perfectionism; Imposter Phenomenon

INTRODUCTION

Perfectionism

There are several definitions and conceptualizations of the word or term ‘*Perfectionism*.’ In its most basic form, it can be understood as a tendency to strive for perfection in every thing that an individual does. Perfectionism can be understood as a tendency or disposition to strive for flawlessness and setting extremely high standards for oneself. Frost et. al. (1990), the creators of the Frost multidimensional Perfectionism Scale define Perfectionism as “high standards of performance which are accompanied by tendencies for overly critical evaluations of one’s behaviour” (p. 450). This includes an individual’s disproportionately high concerns with making mistakes to the extent that performances are evaluated in absolutes of “perfect” or “worthless” and even minor flaws and slip ups are considered to be a failure. It involves a heavy emphasis on order and precision and the person experiences a sense of doubt and shame.

With such a definition of perfectionism, some might argue that there is hardly a difference between perfectionists and individuals who are highly competent and successful (Frost et. al., 1990). It is also possible that people might draw parallels between perfectionism and the attainment of self-actualization by Abraham Maslow. However, these are two separate constructs and there are several features that help us identify perfectionism in an individual.

Firstly, perfectionists are overly critical in their evaluations of their work, they have an inflated level of concern regarding mistakes that they might have made. According to Hamachek (1978), the driving force for perfectionists to strive for their goals is due to a fear of failure rather than to fulfill their need for achievement which may be the driving force of highly successful people. Another feature that sets perfectionists apart from highly competent and successful people is the doubts that they have regarding their work or the quality of their work (Hamachek, 1978). Apart from the fears and doubts regarding mistakes that one might have made, perfectionists tend to have doubts about whether a job is completed satisfactorily. Perfectionists tend to have a sense of uncertainty when the job is completed (Reed, 1985). A third outstanding characteristic of perfectionists are that their perfectionistic tendencies and over critical evaluations stem from a home environment that has provided conditional love and approval (Hamachek, 1978). Perfectionists are described as individuals who place a great emphasis on parental approval, evaluation, and expectations. A fourth and final characteristic of individuals with perfectionistic tendencies that set them apart from high achievers is that they tend to place a heavy emphasis on order and precision. Hollander (1965) describe these tendencies of perfectionists as “fussy and exacting” (p. 96) and state that they usually have a place for everything and that everything must be in its own place. They have certain standards on how things should be and while this does not have any direct relation with the high standards and overly critical evaluations of perfectionists, it describes the way in which the perfectionistic individual goes about their daily life attempting to meet and maintain the standards of orderliness that they have set.

There have been several researches that have highlighted the negative consequences of perfectionism. Some of the negative consequences highlighted in the researches were pervasive self-defeating feelings and a sense of failure and shame along with chronic indecisiveness and procrastination (Burns, 1980; Hamachek, 1978; Hollender, 1965; Pacht, 1984). Other studies have also suggested that perfectionism causes distress in an individual by having a negative impact on self-regulation strategies (Alden, et. al., 1994). More specifically, it is described that having a perfectionistic style leads to excessive scrutiny of one's work and setting excessively high standards which in turn lead to an individual seeing themselves as falling short of the standards that they have set (Alden, et. al., 1994). Other than the behavioural consequences of perfectionism, the negative consequences of perfectionism are mainly associated with psychopathology. Past studies have indicated that perfectionism is associated with a wide range of psychopathological conditions including anxiety, depression, eating disorders, obsessions as well as psychosomatic disorders. (Kearns et. al., 2007; Egan et. al., 2011).

Imposter Phenomenon

The term Imposter Phenomenon was developed by Dr. Pauline Rose Clance and Imes in the year 1978. The term was used to describe a feeling or psychological experience of having the belief or assumption that the individual is not accomplished due to his own ability but due to certain external forces not related to one's genuine ability such as luck or manipulation. This term was developed following a study conducted by Clance and Imes (1978) on a sample of 150 high achieving women. Despite these women being high achievers, it was found that they did not have a sense of internal success. The women believed that they were "imposters" who had fluked their way into the success that they were experiencing. Most of these women attributed their achievements not to their own capabilities but to other external factors such as having the right and strong connections with people, being lucky, simply working harder, being in the right place at the right time or even personal assets unrelated to personal capability and competency such as being charming and relatable. It was also observed that the women in the study had a very difficult time accepting positive feedback and praise about themselves. They would often have a negative reasoning for them receiving a positive evaluation. (Clance & Imes, 1978). Another important point to note when it comes to individuals who suffer from the imposter phenomenon is that they do not possess a realistic sense of their own capabilities and competencies and are not able to fully internalize their assets and at the same time are unable to accept the deficits that they might have. When the feelings of being an imposter are intense, the individual usually may turn down good opportunities in advance from a fear of being in an unknown and uncertain situation, usually settling for something that is sure and certain. For individuals that suffer from the imposter phenomenon, the fear, anxiety, self-doubt, and guilt of being successful acts as a hindrance towards their ability to achieve their highest potentials. Further, they also suffer from a loss of the feelings of joy and reward that comes with the event of experiencing success. (Clance & O'Toole, 1988)

Much like perfectionism, the imposter phenomenon is also seen as a maladaptive style of navigating in the world. It has been said to put limits on one's potential in educational as well as occupational settings. Research in the 1990s found that scores on the Imposter Phenomenon Scale (Clance, 1985) were higher in disturbed adolescents as compared to non-disturbed adolescents (Okoth et. al., 1994). Further research also demonstrated that students in the medical field displayed elevated levels of clinic distress and scores on the Clance Imposter Phenomenon Scale were the greatest predictors of their levels of distress (Henning et. al., 1998). Research conducted in 2001 by Ross et. al., also demonstrated that one of the characteristics of the imposter phenomenon was neuroticism.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A study conducted by Pannhausen et. al., in 2020 aimed to study the relationship between the various facets of perfectionism and the imposter phenomenon. The study consisted of 274 participants and the scales used were the Clance Imposter Phenomenon scale (Clance, 1985), the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (Frost et. al., 1990), and the Hewitt & Flett Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale - SF (Hewitt & Flett, 2000). The results of the study indicated a high correlation between the imposter phenomenon and overall levels of perfectionism. Further, in the research, age and gender explained 4% of the variance in the manifestation of imposter phenomenon. Further, it was observed that the socially prescribed perfectionism had the highest correlation with the imposter phenomenon and self-oriented perfectionism had a moderate correlation to the imposter phenomenon.

A study conducted by Holden et. al., 2021 aimed to examine the role of perfectionism and stress on imposter syndrome among college students. The study consisted of a sample of 388 students with 306 females and 82 males. The tools used in the current study were the Imposterism Scale (Leary et. al., 2000) and the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). The results of the study indicated that there was a significant positive relationship between the imposter phenomenon and perfectionism among both first generation college students and continuing college students. It was also observed that socially prescribed perfectionism had a greater impact on the experiences of the imposter phenomenon.

The study conducted by Wang et. al. in 2019 aimed to investigate whether there were any potential mediating effects of the imposter phenomenon on maladaptive perfectionism and psychological distress. The study aimed to answer two main research questions which were whether imposter phenomenon acted as a mediator between psychological distress and

maladaptive perfectionism and whether experiencing the imposter phenomenon change the association between maladaptive perfectionism and psychological distress. The scales used in the study were Clance Imposter Phenomenon Scale (Clance, 1985), the Short Almost Perfect Scale (Rice, et. al., 2014) and the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale -21 (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). The results of the study indicated that the imposter phenomenon did act as a mediator between perfectionism and psychological distress.

In a study conducted by Pratt in 2020, the researcher aimed to investigate the possible relationship between perfectionism – specifically perfectionistic concerns and the imposter phenomenon along with self-efficacy, social acceptance and belonging. The sample consisted of 48 undergraduate students who were all females. Perfectionism was measured using subscales from the Flett & Hewitt Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (Flett & Hewitt, 1991) and the Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (Frost et. al., 1990). Imposter phenomenon was measured using the Clance Imposter Phenomenon scale (Clance, 1985). The results of the study indicated that those who scored higher on perfectionistic concerns also scored high on the imposter phenomenon scale indicating a positive relationship between imposter phenomenon and perfectionism.

A study conducted by Tigranyan et. al. in 2021 aimed to investigate the relationship between imposter phenomenon and perfectionism and various other variables such as depression, anxiety, self-efficacy, self-compassion, and self-esteem in a sample of clinical and counselling doctoral students. The scales used in the study were the Clance Imposter Phenomenon Scale (Clance, 1985), Perfectionistic Cognitions Scale (Flett et. al., 1998), Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), Generalised Anxiety Disorder Scale (Spitzer, 2006), and the Achievement Motives scale (Lang & Fries, 2006). The results of the study mirrored those of other studies where there was a significant positive relationship between imposter phenomenon and perfectionism as well as the other variables. The study also reported a negative relationship between imposter phenomenon and achievement motives.

A study conducted by Raof in the year 2023 aimed to examine the relationship between imposter phenomenon and perfectionism among first-year engineering students in an Indian university. The sample of the study consisted of 301 engineering students between the ages 18-25. The scales used in the study were the Clance Imposter Phenomenon Scale (Clance, 1985) and the Hewitt & Flett Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). The results of the study indicated that there was indeed a significant positive relationship between the imposter phenomenon and perfectionism. More specifically, it was found that the positive correlation was highest for self-oriented perfectionism and imposter phenomenon, moderate for socially prescribed perfectionism, and there was no significant correlation found for other-oriented perfectionism.

METHODOLOGY

Aim: To study the prevalence of perfectionism and imposter phenomenon and the relationship between perfectionism and imposter phenomenon among postgraduate students in India.

Objectives:

- To study the relationship between perfectionism and imposter phenomenon among postgraduate students.
- To examine which aspects of perfectionism highlighted in the Hewitt & Flett Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale will have the strongest correlation to the imposter phenomenon.

Hypotheses:

H1 – There will be a significant positive relationship between perfectionism and imposter phenomenon.

H2 – There will be a significant positive relationship between socially prescribed perfectionism and imposter phenomenon.

H3 – There will be a significant positive relationship between other oriented perfectionism and imposter phenomenon.

H4 – There will be a significant positive relationship between self-oriented perfectionism and imposter phenomenon.

Variables (Operational Definition):

Perfectionism: The tendency to set exceedingly high expectations while striving for flawlessness and being overly critical in evaluations.

Imposter Phenomenon: The tendency to feel as though one is not worthy of praise and recognition for their achievements and may feel as though they are fraudulent.

Sample:

The current study had a sample of 189 Indian postgraduates with 56 males and 133 females. The sample consisted of students from various departments such as psychology, business, and technology.

Tools:

Perfectionism

Perfectionism was measured using the Hewitt & Flett Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (HFMPs, Hewitt & Flett, 1991). This scale was developed by Hewitt and Flett in 1991 after the researchers recognized the need to take into

consideration personal and interpersonal components of perfectionism. The HFMPs (Hewitt & Flett, 1991) is a 45-item measure that is scored on a 7-point Likert scale. The scale consists of 3 subscales measuring 3 dimensions of perfectionism.

1. Self – oriented: This subscale measures the extreme personal standards that an individual might hold for themselves.
2. Other – oriented: This subscale measures the extreme standards that one might place on others, demanding of them to meet these standards.
3. Socially – prescribed: This subscale is measuring the perception that society is imposing demands on the individual to be perfect.

Reliability of the HFMPs (Hewitt & Flett, 1991) yielded Cronbach alpha coefficients of .88, .74, and .81 for self, other, and socially prescribed perfectionism respectively.

Imposter Phenomenon

Imposter Phenomenon was measured using the Clance Imposter Phenomenon Scale (CIPS; Clance, 1985) which was developed by Dr. Pauline Rose Clance in the year 1985. The CIPS is a 25-item measure which is scored on a 5-point Likert scale.

Reliability of the CIPS (Clance, 1985) has been found to have high level of internal consistency with Cronbach alphas ranging between .84 to .96 (Prince, 1989; Holmes et. al., 1993).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 Mean and standard deviation scores of sample.

	N Statistic	Minimum Statistic	Maximum Statistic	Mean Statistic	Std. Deviation Statistic
Perfectionism Score	189	113.0	237.0	181.788	23.5254
Self-Oriented Perfectionism Score	189	14.0	92.0	65.053	11.6335
Other Oriented Perfectionism Score	189	24.0	78.0	56.190	10.3372
Socially Prescribed Perfectionism Score	189	30.0	91.0	60.545	11.0754
Imposter Phenomenon Score	189	20.0	100.0	67.122	16.1265

The table above displays the descriptive statistics for the sample (N = 189) of the study. As is depicted on the table, the sample showed a mean perfectionism score of 181.78 with a standard deviation of 23.52 (**X = 181.78, SD = 23.52**) indicating a moderately high level of perfectionism. Further, the table also depicts the average scores of the sample in each of the subscales. The mean scores of the sample on the Self Oriented subscale was found to be 65.05 (**X = 65.05, SD = 11.63**), on the Other Oriented subscale, the mean was found to be 56.19 (**X = 56.19, SD = 10.33**), and on the Socially Prescribed Subscale, the mean was found to be 60.54 (**X = 60.54, SD = 11.07**). Finally, the sample showed a mean imposter phenomenon score of 67.12 with a standard deviation of 16.12 (**X = 67.12, SD = 16.12**) depicting high levels of imposter phenomenon.

As the aim of the research was to study the relationship between perfectionism and imposter phenomenon, a Pearson’s Correlation was conducted via SPSS in order to find the relationship between perfectionism and imposter phenomenon.

Table 2 Table depicting Pearson’s correlation scores between perfectionism and imposter phenomenon.

		Perfectionism Score	Imposter Phenomenon Score
Perfectionism Score	Pearson Correlation Sig. (1-tailed) N	1 189	.267** .000 189
Imposter Phenomenon Score	Pearson Correlation Sig. (1-tailed) N	.267** .000 189	1 189

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed)

The table above depicts the correlation between perfectionism and imposter phenomenon. This was done via SPSS and Pearson’s correlation was used for investigating the relationship. The primary hypothesis of the study was that there will be a significant positive relationship between perfectionism and imposter phenomenon. As can be seen the correlation

between perfectionism and imposter phenomenon was found to be .267 significant at the 0.01 level which is a significant positive correlation albeit a low correlation, hence proving the hypothesis.

Further the data was found to be significant at the 0.01 level ($\alpha = 0.01$) indicating that the p value is less than 0.05. This indicates that the null hypothesis “There is no significant positive relationship between perfectionism and imposter phenomenon” can be rejected.

These results mirror those conducted by previous researchers who have found in their studies that there is a significant positive correlation between imposter phenomenon and perfectionism.

A study conducted by Holden et. al., 2021 aimed to examine the role of perfectionism and stress on imposter syndrome among college students. The results of the study indicated that there was a significant positive relationship between the imposter phenomenon and perfectionism among both first generation college students and continuing college students. Further, a more recent study conducted by Raoof in the year 2023 aimed to examine the relationship between imposter phenomenon and perfectionism among first-year engineering students in an Indian university. The results of the study indicated that there was indeed a significant positive relationship between the imposter phenomenon and perfectionism.

Table 3 Table depicting correlation of perfectionism dimensions and imposter phenomenon.

		Imposter Phenomenon Score	Perfectionism Score	Self-Oriented Perfectionism Score	Other Oriented Perfectionism Score	Socially Prescribed Perfectionism Score
Imposter Phenomenon Score	Pearson	1	.267	.275	-.133	.403
	Correlation		.000	.000	.034	.000
	Sig. (1-tailed) N	189	189	189	189	189
Perfectionism Score	Pearson	.267	1	.746	.625	.757
	Correlation	.000		.000	.000	.000
	Sig. (1-tailed) N	189	189	189	189	189
Self-Oriented Perfectionism Score	Pearson	.275	.746	1	.165	.381
	Correlation	.000	.000		.012	.000
	Sig. (1-tailed) N	189	189	189	189	189
Other Oriented Perfectionism Score	Pearson	-1.33	.625	.165	1	.222
	Correlation	0.34	.000	.012		.001
	Sig. (1-tailed) N	189	189	189	189	189
Socially Prescribed Perfectionism Score	Pearson	.403	.757	.381	.222	1
	Correlation	.000	.000	.000	.001	
	Sig. (1-tailed) N	189	189	189	189	189

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed)

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed)

Table 3 depicts the correlations between the three dimensions of perfectionism from the Hewitt & Flett Multidimensional Scale (Hewitt & Flett, 1991) and imposter phenomenon. As can be seen from the above table the dimension of perfectionism that has the strongest correlation with imposter phenomenon was found to be the socially prescribed dimension of perfectionism.

The correlation between socially prescribed perfectionism and imposter phenomenon was found to be .403 significant at the 0.01 level indicating a significant positive relationship. Further, the relationship between socially prescribed perfectionism and the imposter phenomenon is the strongest amongst the other dimensions.

Since the correlation was found to be significant at the 0.01 level indicating that the p value is less than 0.05, we can reject the null hypothesis “there is no significant positive correlation between socially prescribed perfectionism and imposter phenomenon.”

This is similar to results found by previous researchers as well. Pannhausen et. al. (2020) apart from finding a significant correlation between perfectionism and the imposter phenomenon also reported in their study that socially prescribed perfectionism had the highest correlation with the imposter phenomenon. This was also reflected in the study conducted by Holden et. al. who found significant positive relationship between perfectionism and imposter phenomenon and the strongest relationship between socially prescribed perfectionism and imposter phenomenon. Stoeber and Otto (2006) suggest that socially prescribed perfectionism may have the strongest impact on imposter phenomenon because in socially prescribed perfectionism, meeting the expectations and standards set by others determine one’s sense of competency and worth. There is a heavy emphasis on validation received from external sources leading to people experiencing the imposter phenomenon if they do not achieve what others expect of them rather than believing in one’s own abilities.

The correlation between self-oriented perfectionism and imposter phenomenon was found to be .27 which was significant at the 0.01 level indicating a significant positive correlation between the two. Since the significance level was 0.01 indicating that the p value was less than 0.05, the null hypothesis “there will be no significant positive correlation between self-oriented perfectionism and the imposter phenomenon” will be rejected.

Finally, as can be seen in table 4.3, the correlation between other-oriented perfectionism and imposter phenomenon was found to be -.13 which indicates a negative relationship between the two. This mirrors the results of a study conducted by Raof in 2023 who found that there was a negative relationship between other oriented perfectionism and imposter phenomenon. Further, a study conducted by Vergauwe et. al., in 2015 suggests that individuals may not experience the same level of self-doubt and fraudulence characteristic of the imposter phenomenon when it comes to other oriented perfectionism as it entails setting high standards for others rather than expecting high standards from oneself.

Even though the correlation found was significant at the 0.05 level, it was found to be negative, thus we fail to reject the null hypothesis. Hence, the null hypothesis “there will be no significant positive correlation between other oriented perfectionism and imposter phenomenon’ will be retained.

CONCLUSION

The present study aimed to study the relationship between Perfectionism and Imposter Phenomenon among Indian Postgraduate students and to investigate which dimension of perfectionism as explained by Hewitt & Flett (1991) will have the strongest correlation with imposter phenomenon. Descriptive statistics revealed that the sample showed moderately high levels of imposter phenomenon and perfectionism indicating that it is prevalent among postgraduate students in India. Further, it has been found that there is a significant positive relationship between perfectionism and imposter phenomenon with a correlation coefficient of 0.26 with socially prescribed perfectionism having the highest correlation with imposter phenomenon with a correlation coefficient of 0.403. All in all, the objectives of the study have been fulfilled.

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