

Establishing the Manifestation, Triggers, and Coping Strategies for Imposter Syndrome Among Academics - A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Imposter Syndrome (IS) is a prevalent issue among faculty members, significantly contributing to reduced research productivity, low job satisfaction, faculty burnout, and diminished student engagement. Despite increasing scholarly interest in IS, existing studies remain fragmented, posing a challenge for academic developers seeking to translate current research into effective support strategies. This systematic review synthesizes findings from 47 studies on IS in academic settings, systematically mapping its triggers, manifestations, and coping mechanisms. By integrating insights from individual, institutional, and sector-wide perspectives, this review extends beyond mere identification of IS. It offers evidence-based solutions at multiple levels, establishing a foundation for informed policy-making, institutional development, and targeted professional support initiatives tailored to the specific needs of academics.

Full paper

Academia is often perceived as a prestigious domain where intellectual excellence is collectively fostered. However, many academics contend with persistent and often debilitating self-doubt, questioning their competence and fearing they do not truly belong in their profession despite their achievements.

This phenomenon is referred to as impostor syndrome ('IS'), imposterism, or impostor phenomenon. First identified among high-achieving women by Clance and Imes in 1978, IS is a psychological experience characterized by pervasive self-doubt, feelings of fraudulence, and an inability to internalize success despite competence (Clance & Imes, 1978; Matthews & Clance, 1985). Consequently, IS fosters emotions of inauthenticity, inadequacy, and the paralyzing fear of exposure as intellectual fraud (Breeze, 2019).

IS is particularly pronounced in professions and disciplines that emphasize high performance and competition (Parkman, 2016; Chakraverty, 2022), for instance among healthcare professionals (Edwards-Maddox, 2023; Joseph et al., 2023; Lin et al., 2022). As such, it is also widespread across academic disciplines and career stages (Burford et al., 2022; Carvajal et al., 2023; Murcraay, 2023). Indeed, Houston (2015, p.73) argues that “academia is filled with intelligent, successful people who are pursued by these doubts and fears”. However, whilst existing reviews look at experiences of students, or both staff and students, this is the first to focus exclusively on the experiences of academics.

Despite increasing research interest in IS, existing studies remain fragmented in their scope, theoretical frameworks, and practical applications. This lack of cohesion poses significant challenges for academic developers aiming to synthesize current knowledge to effectively support scholars in recognizing and addressing IS. Accordingly, this systematic review seeks to integrate the existing literature on imposter syndrome among academics to address the following research questions:

Question 1: What are the triggers of IS among academics?

Question 2: How does IS manifest among academics?

Question 3: What coping strategies are implemented to address IS among academics?

To investigate the current state of knowledge regarding IS among academics, we conducted a systematic literature review, which constitutes a recognized method for conducting evidence-based policy (Pittaway and Cope, 2007). For data collection, we systematically searched three electronic databases for empirical studies on IS among academics, published in English between 1994 and 2023. To ensure the inclusion of primary research, we excluded reviews, meta-analyses, and editorials. This search yielded 47 relevant articles, which were subsequently analyzed using content analysis (Donthu et al., 2021).

While non-belonging, “othering” (Canales, 2000), and perceived lack of competence were identified as significant individual triggers of IS, findings suggest that the socio-political, neoliberal, and competitive structure of higher education substantially contributes to its manifestation among academics.

Findings on the manifestation of IS among academics underscore its multifaceted and complex nature, encompassing emotional, physical, and behavioral dimensions. Notably, IS not only undermines emotional well-being but can also be present as a physically debilitating experience. Moreover, and less discussed in the literature about IS, it can lead to avoidance behaviors that hinder career advancement, including diminished research productivity.

Finally, while various coping strategies have been described or recommended, few studies systematically evaluate or empirically test their effectiveness. Furthermore, although the broader culture and climate of higher education have been identified as instrumental factors triggering IS, none of the articles evaluated, tested, or discussed industry-wide

strategies that can prevent, or address IS among academics. As Morris et al., (2022) observes, 'frequently, the underlying assumption is that it is individuals who are the problem and need 'fixing,' rather than organizational structures, cultures, processes and practices. Remedial action may be offered, training individuals to 'manage' feelings or 'develop resilience' rather than tackling systemic and structural circumstances that engender such feelings' (p.235).

The findings underscore the importance of a dual approach to addressing IS. While self-help strategies provide immediate, individualized relief, organizational support ensures a sustainable, systemic impact. The interplay between these approaches creates a holistic framework for addressing IS, allowing individuals to feel empowered and supported. Individuals can take proactive steps to build resilience and leverage impostor feelings as a source of empowerment. Conversely, institutions must recognize that tackling IS is not solely the individual's responsibility. Fostering inclusive, supportive environments and providing targeted interventions can address the systemic factors contributing to IS.

By synthesizing insights from individual, institutional, and sector-wide perspectives, this review extends beyond identifying and describing IS. It presents evidence-based solutions at multiple levels, providing a foundation for informed policy-making, institutional development, and targeted professional support initiatives that address the specific needs of academics.