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MIND

Feel Like a Fraud? At Times, Maybe You Should

By [BENEDICT CAREY](#)

Stare into a mirror long enough and it's hard not to wonder whether that's a mask staring back, and if so, who's really behind it.

A similar self-doubt can cloud a public identity as well, especially for anyone who has just stepped into a new role. College graduate. New mother. Medical doctor. Even, for that matter, presidential nominee.

Presidents and parents, after all, are expected to make crucial decisions on a dime. Doctors are being asked to save lives, and graduate students to know how Aristotle's conception of virtue differed from Aquinas's conception of — uh-oh.

Who's kidding whom?

Social [psychologists](#) have studied what they call the impostor phenomenon since at least the 1970s, when a pair of therapists at Georgia State University used the phrase to describe the internal experience of a group of high-achieving women who had a secret sense they were not as capable as others thought. Since then researchers have documented such fears in adults of all ages, as well as adolescents.

Their findings have veered well away from the original conception of impostorism as a reflection of an anxious personality or a cultural stereotype. Feelings of phoniness appear to alter people's goals in unexpected ways and may also protect them against subconscious self-delusions.

Questionnaires measuring impostor fears ask people how much they agree with statements like these: “At times, I feel my success has been due to some kind of luck.” “I can give the impression that I’m more competent than I really am.” “If I’m to receive a promotion of some kind, I hesitate to tell others until it’s an accomplished fact.”

Researchers have found, as expected, that people who score highly on such [scales](#) tend to be less confident, more moody and rattled by performance anxieties than those who score lower.

But the dread of being found out is hardly always paralyzing. Two Purdue psychologists, Shamala Kumar and Carolyn M. Jagacinski, gave 135 college students a series of questionnaires, measuring [anxiety](#) level, impostor feelings and approach to academic goals. They found that women who scored highly also reported a strong desire to show that they could do better than others. They competed harder.

By contrast, men who scored highly on the impostor scale showed more desire to avoid contests in areas where they felt vulnerable. “The motivation was to avoid doing poorly, looking weak,” Dr. Jagacinski said.

Yet if feelings of phoniness were all bad, it seems unlikely that they would be so familiar to so many emotionally well-adapted people.

In a 2000 study at [Wake Forest University](#), psychologists had people who scored highly on an impostor scale predict how they would do on a coming test of intellectual and social skills. An experimenter, they were told, would discuss their answers with them later.

Sure enough, the self-styled impostors predicted that they would do poorly. But when making the same predictions in private — anonymously, they were told — the same people rated their chances on the test as highly as people who scored low on the impostor scale.

In short, the researchers concluded, many self-styled impostors are phony phonies: they adopt self-deprecation as a social strategy, consciously or not, and are secretly more confident than they let on.

“Particularly when people think that they might not be able to live up to others’ views of them, they may maintain that they are not as good as other people think,” Dr. Mark Leary, the lead author, wrote in an e-mail message. “In this way, they lower others’ expectations — and get credit for being humble.”

In a study published in September, Rory O’Brien McElwee and Tricia Yurak of Rowan University in Glassboro, N.J., had 253 students take an exhaustive battery of tests assessing how people present themselves in public. They found that psychologically speaking, impostorism looked a lot more like a self-presentation strategy than a personality trait.

In an interview, Dr. McElwee said that as a social strategy, projecting oneself as an impostor can lower expectations for a performance and take pressure off a person — as long as the self-deprecation doesn’t go too far. “It’s the difference between saying you got drunk before the SAT and actually doing it,” she said. “One provides a ready excuse, and the other is self-destructive.”

In mild doses, feeling like a fraud also tempers the natural instinct to define one’s own competence in self-serving ways. Researchers have shown in careful studies that people tend to be poor judges of their own performance and often to overrate their abilities. Their opinions about how well they’ve done on a test, or at a job, or in a class are often way off others’ evaluations. They’re confident that they can detect liars (they can’t) and forecast grades (not so well).

This native confidence is likely to be functional: in a world of profound uncertainty, self-serving delusion probably helps people to get out of bed and chase their pet projects.

But it can be poison when the job calls for expertise and accountability, and the expertise is wanting. From her study, Dr. McElwee concluded that impostor fears most likely came and went in most people, and were most acute when, for example, a teacher first had to stand up in front of a class, or a new mechanic or lawyer took on real liability.

At those times feeling like a fraud amounts to more than the stirrings of an anxious temperament or the desire to project a protective humility. It reflects a respect for the limits of one's own abilities, and an intuition that only a true impostor would be afraid to ask for help.