Leadership Impostor phenomenon: A Theoretical Causal Model

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The impostor phenomenon (IP) is a well-researched occurrence that describes highly successful people who cannot internalize their success and believe their achievements in life or their career were the result of chance or extraordinary effort. The concept was originally thought to occur more frequently in women. However, further investigation illustrates that both men and women experience impostor feelings. Researchers have associated IP with concepts such as the fear of failure, a lack of confidence, and procrastination. This article presents a theory of leadership impostor phenomenon that addresses how leaders might experience IP. The research makes seven propositions about how leaders might encounter IP. The seven propositions are then used to develop a theoretical causal model of leadership impostor phenomenon demonstrating that high achievement leads to the fear of failure, which results in a lack of confidence and procrastination. The model also includes outcomes leaders could experience because of IP, including risk aversion, indecisiveness, and procrastination. The study extends the current body of research on IP and offers a path for further investigation of the theory.

The concept of the impostor phenomenon (IP) has gained popularity in the mainstream press and has received attention from social science and psychology researchers (Mount & Tardanico, 2014). According to Mount and Tardanico (2014), IP occurs when "successful and intelligent professionals feel they do not deserve their accomplishments and that they have faked their way to success" (In Brief section, para. 1). Clance (1985) first identified the phenomenon when working with highly successful women, and in early studies on the phenomenon, it was thought that IP most frequently occurs in women. However, studies have identified that both women and men experience the phenomenon (Chrisman, Pieper, Clance, Holland & Glickauf-Hughes, 1995). Clance developed a scale for measuring the concept and suggested people who are high-achievers and who typically experience a high level of success in their roles most often suffer from IP.

Mount and Tardanico (2014) asserted that people who experience IP also often experience anxiety, have a fear of failure, a lack confidence, and may suffer from procrastination, risk aversion, and workaholism. Mount (2015) further offered that people suffering from IP focus on their weaknesses and shortcomings rather than on the areas in which they are skilled or possess natural talents and abilities. This negative attention to one's deficiencies, coupled with self-doubt, can lead to high levels of stress (Mount, 2015). People who suffer from IP might also experience strain on their relationships because they feel they should work more to keep people from noticing their failings (Mount, 2015). By working more, or even obsessively, people dealing with impostor phenomenon might find themselves spending less time with loved ones.

In addition to defining IP, authors have written extensively about ways in which people can overcome the phenomenon. Jones (2009) suggested that people suffering from IP should take steps such as assuming more risks, being willing to accept constructive criticism, asking for help, and understanding that failure is not shameful. An article in Business Management Daily proposed that high achievers should learn to focus on their strengths rather than their weaknesses, fake confidence until they feel confident, become an expert, and share self-doubt with colleagues and superiors ("How to overcome impostor phenomenon," 2016). By focusing on strengths, a person can channel his work efforts into the areas that allow him to experience small victories. The concept of feigning confidence involves a person speaking up, taking chances, and putting herself out front on projects and in meetings. While doing so, the person pretends to be confident in her approach, ideas, work product, and decision-making, and the faked confidence will materialize into real confidence ("How to overcome impostor phenomenon," 2016). Learning more and becoming an expert could also positively affect a person's self-doubt and experience with impostor feelings.

Impostor phenomenon has received generous attention in popular press articles, self-help books, and within research. The phenomenon has been examined in a variety of contexts such as in gender (September, McCarrey, Baranowsky, & Schindler, 2001), among college students (King & Cooley, 1995), in fields such as nursing (Aubeeluck, Stacey, & Stupple, 2016), and among racial and ethnic minorities (Peteet, Montgomery, & Weekes, 2015). However, an opportunity exists to expand the body of knowledge on the concept to understand IP better, specifically as it relates to highly successful leaders. Additionally, more study is needed to develop a theory of leadership impostor phenomenon and its underlying assumptions and structure as it relates to top executives and organizational leaders. This theory would focus primarily on IP found in people who hold the highest positions of leadership and authority within their companies or organizations. The present article will build on the current writing and research on IP and provide a research foundation to investigate themes and ideas that have been presented about the phenomenon and work toward a theory of leadership impostor phenomenon. Suggestions for future research will also be provided.

Leadership and Impostor phenomenon

The current body of research on impostor phenomenon focuses on highly successful people and those who are often classified as high achievers; the research does not specifically address how the phenomenon might present in people who hold the top position of leadership in their group or organization. While IP is well researched, much of the early studies on the concept were conducted with student groups in college and graduate programs rather than in workplaces or with leaders of organizations (Rohrmann, Bechtoldt, & Leonhardt, 2016). Yukl (2013) suggested that there are as many definitions of leadership, as people are working to develop a definition of the concept. Therefore, various definitions of leadership have been developed. After analyzing many of the varying definitions of leadership, Yukl proposed that leadership is a process in which a leader inspires a group of people to work together to achieve a common goal or purpose. The concepts explored in this research will address previously identified characteristics of IP such as the fear of failure, a lack of confidence, risk aversion, and perfectionism, and propose how individuals in leadership might experience each characteristic of the phenomenon. The paper will outline eight propositions about IP, and those propositions will be used to suggest a causal model of leadership impostor phenomenon and outcomes of the phenomenon. The research builds on current knowledge and offers a path for future investigation of the construct.

Fear of Failure in Leaders

The fear of failure has been associated with IP and found to have the potential to result in both positive and negative outcomes for individuals and organizations (Mount & Tardanico, 2014). A significant body of research addresses the concept of the fear of failure and how people from various industries and backgrounds deal with the phenomenon. A significant number of research studies have specifically addressed entrepreneurs and how these business leaders handle their fears of failure amidst the pressures of launching a new business or organization. Entrepreneurs often face unique challenges, as they navigate building organizations and teams, that could lead to the fear of failure as the entrepreneurs often serve in the top or only leadership position in their organizations.

In addition to the fear of failure at the individual level, researchers have also observed the concept at the organizational level. On the organizational level, leaders who fear failure might hinder an organization by not making necessary changes that could move the organization forward. This lack of forward movement could lead to a decrease in organizational performance (de Souza & Tomei, 2016). Leaders might become paralyzed by anxiety and allow that anxiety and fear to prevent them from making important decisions that could determine the success or failure of their organizations or groups. On an individual level, leaders who are afraid of making mistakes might inhibit

themselves from taking the steps needed to grow personally and professionally and to achieve success in their careers (Cacciotti, Hayton, Mitchel, & Giazitzoglu, 2016).

Despite the obvious challenges presented by the fear of failure, some people and organizations could benefit from a leader who faces this type of anxiety (de Souza & Tomei, 2016; Morgan & Sisak, 2016). Leaders who concern themselves with not failing might pay greater attention to details to ensure they do not make a mistake that would highlight a deficiency in their ability to carry out their jobs (de Souza & Tomei, 2016). The resultant attention to detail could lead to a better, higher-quality work product for the leader and organization which could result in both growth for the leader and an increase in organizational performance. Furthermore, the fear of failure could serve to motivate leaders. A professional who acknowledges being afraid to fail might also be highly motivated to achieve success in their jobs and for their organizations (Cacciotti, Hayton, Mitchell, & Giazitzoglu, 2016).

As previously mentioned, several researchers have sought to understand the fear of failure as it relates to entrepreneurs. Cacciotti, Hayton, Mitchell, and Giazitzoglu (2016) studied the unique characteristics of entrepreneurs and how the fear of failure could either cripple or motivate them as they launch and grow their businesses. Entrepreneurs typically serve as the top executive or leader of their organizations and often face a substantial amount of risk and uncertain environments. Cacciotti, Hayton, Mitchell, and Giazitzoglu suggested that fear of failure in people who launch businesses could be used to study entrepreneurial motivation and elements such as the entrepreneurs need to achieve, passion and optimism for her business as well as self-efficacy. The concept of self-efficacy is juxtaposed to the idea of self-doubt which will be explored in more detail in a subsequent section. Morgan and Sisak (2016) suggested that when an entrepreneur reaches a certain level of success, his fear of failure could serve to motivate him to increase his investments in the businesses. The Morgan and Sisak asserted that the opposite is true for individuals who have not achieved success such that they are unmotivated and may not be willing to make investments in their businesses. People who have not yet been successful or have only experienced marginal gains in their business might experience a debilitating effect from fearing to fail.

Proposition 1: Highly successful leaders will experience the fear of failure.

Lack of Self-Confidence in Leaders

Two individuals with the same set of skills and talents and in the same role can experience different outcomes regarding successfully executing their jobs. Hollenbeck and Hall (2004) suggested that the difference in the level of performance from the successful person to the unsuccessful person might be explained by the level of self-confidence these individuals possess. Hollenbeck and Hall defined self-confidence as "our judgment of our capability to successfully accomplish something" (p. 255). The

researchers suggested that early studies of the phenomenon pointed to the idea that self-confidence was either a trait that people were born possessing or had been exposed to early in life by an encouraging family or environment. However, research now suggested that confidence can be developed in leaders (Hollenbeck & Hall, 2004).

As mentioned in the previous section, fear might motivate a leader to work harder and with a greater attention to detail (de Souza & Tomei, 2016). However, Hallenbeck and Hall (2004) suggested that self-confidence allows a leader to maintain a calm and level-headed approach to achieving goals. Self-confidence might also contribute to a leader perceiving fewer situations as threatening, and therefore, allow the leader to move forward and experience growth (Hallenbeck & Hall, 2004), while the opposite would be true for leaders who lacked self-confidence. Overconfidence lies on the other end of the spectrum and could be detrimental to a leader's performance (Shipman & Mumford, 2011). Shipman and Mumford (2011) suggested that low levels of confidence might lead to a leader taking more time to adequately and strategically plan as well as cast a compelling vision. The researchers suggested that overconfidence might cause a leader to fail to plan activities which can be detrimental to both their career and the organization writ large.

Proposition 2: The fear of failure in highly successful leaders will lead to a lack of confidence and self-doubt in leaders.

Perfectionism in Leaders

Flett and Hewitt (2002) suggested that perfectionists seek flawlessness in themselves and their work. According to Flett and Hewitt, perfectionists may also demonstrate depressive behaviors because they are never truly pleased with themselves or the work they have done. White (2016) offers that perfectionism is in opposition to effective leadership. According to White, effective leaders are individuals who take calculated risks, deal well with uncertain and ambiguous circumstances, are flexible, and can thrive despite making decisions that might seem irrational or illogical to others (p. 429). However, leaders who struggle with perfectionism are not able to handle these situations (White, 2016). White suggested that effective leaders must find a way to make decisions, despite not having all the answers. Perfectionists need to feel a certain sense of security before deciding, which can lead to procrastination, another characteristic of IP (Mount & Tardanico, 2014). White further offers that perfectionism leads to indecisiveness in leaders.

Proposition 3: The fear of failure in leaders will lead to perfectionism.

Proposition 4: Lack of confidence will lead to impostor phenomenon in leaders.

Proposition 5: Perfectionism will lead to impostor phenomenon in leaders.

Risk Aversion in Leaders with Impostor phenomenon

Risk aversion is an unwillingness to act in the absence of surety and during uncertainty. Oreg (2003) suggested that risk aversion also relates to a leader's unwillingness to participate in the process of change in an organization. A leader's willingness or unwillingness to take on risks or the amount of risk that leader is willing to take will affect the goals the leader establishes for her team, and the process by which the leader works with follower toward achieving these goals (Ivancevich, Konopaske, & Matteson, 2014). Risk aversion has also been demonstrated to have a negative effect on a leader's ability to make timely decisions that might benefit an organization or team. Simon (1960) distinguished between two types of decisions that managers and organizational leaders make, those that are programmed and those that are non-programmed. Programmed decisions do not require leaders to take much risk because they typically involve routine problems. However, Simon suggested that non-programmed decisions involved challenges that were more complex and included a unique set of circumstances. Therefore, non-programmed decisions involve more risk than those made routinely.

The level of risk aversion a person has can be linked to several emotions the person experiences such as fear, anger, surprise, and happiness (Holt & Laury, 2002). A feeling of fear has been associated with impostor phenomenon, as previously established (Mount & Tardanico, 2014). Holt and Laury (2002) suggested that the more fear a person has, the more risk aversion the person demonstrates. Likewise, people who demonstrated higher levels of emotion were more likely to demonstrate an unwillingness to take risks, while people who remained emotionless were more likely to participate in higher levels of risk-taking.

Managerial risk aversion could lead to organizational decline, according to Carmeli and Sheaffer (2009), who asserted that managers who neglect to gather pertinent information from other people or who fail to listen to the input of others when engaging in the decision-making process may also be less likely to make a risky decision. Carmeli and Sheaffer further asserted that leaders who are risk averse might also be more likely to lead organizations or groups that fall victim to the group behavior phenomenon groupthink. According to Janis (1982), groupthink occurs when people in a group choose not to communicate a dissenting view from the ideas proposed by other group members to maintain cohesion or for fear of no longer being accepted as a member of the group. White (2016) suggested effective leaders can take calculated risk. The ability to take measured risks means these individuals can participate in a balanced approach to risk taking that involves considering all the options and making an informed decision, even if the leader recognizes that uncertainty still exists within the process.

Proposition 6: Leaders who feel like impostors will be less willing to take risks, even calculated risks, because they want to continue to be accepted by others as having a high level of knowledge and skill in their roles.

Indecisiveness in Leaders with Impostor phenomenon

The ability of leaders to make decisions clearly, confidently, collaboratively, and efficiently can contribute to the success of the leader. Leaders of organizations typically bare both the responsibility of making decisions and the consequences of those decisions (Brunsson, 2007). However, Barkley-Levenson and Fox (2016) suggested that little empirical research exists regarding decisiveness and indecisiveness and the relationship between the constructs and other traits. Barkley-Levenson and Fox define indecisiveness as the "frequent inability to make decisions confidently, quickly, and/or efficiently" (p. 1). The researchers suggested that leaders who are indecisive might react by making an impulse decision or by further delaying the decision-making process. The delay of decisions will be explored more in the following section on procrastination.

According to Elaydi (2006), indecisiveness can be the product of fear and negative emotions. The researcher posits, "When facing a difficult decision, negative concurrent emotions may be so overwhelming that the individual becomes emotionally paralyzed during the decision-making process" (p. 1366). Elaydi suggested that indecisiveness can be debilitating for both individuals and organizations. Leaders who deal with indecisiveness become stuck in what Jones (1989) described as undecided and uncomfortable. This uncomfortable emotion also relates to increased anxiety for the leader who is faced with a decision and becomes trapped in the decision-making process. As previously demonstrated, leaders with impostor phenomenon will likely struggle with perfectionism that leads to indecisiveness, and therefore, face feelings of discomfort and anxiety. Elaydi asserted that indecisiveness prohibits leaders from being able to perform effectively. These leaders might also be less prepared to handle challenges on the job due to their inability to make decisions (McNeill, Dunlop, Skinner, & Morrison, 2016).

Proposition 7: Leaders who feel like impostors will be more likely to report indecisiveness because they lack confidence in their ability, and they want to make the *right* decision due to perfectionism.

Procrastination in Leaders with Impostor phenomenon

Procrastination occurs when a person chooses to postpone an activity, even when he knows the postponement might cause an issue (Steel, 2007). The phenomenon has also been described as putting off more complicated or complex tasks in favor of those that are less involved or more enjoyable (Batool, Khursheed, & Jahangir, 2017). Two types of procrastination have been proposed which are avoidant procrastination and arousal

procrastination (Lyons & Rice, 2014). According to Lyons and Rice (2014), avoidant procrastination relates to putting off tasks to focus on less complicated tasks or to avoid negative feedback related to one's performance. Arousal procrastination relates to a positive feeling of arousal that people experience from completing a task just before the deadline (Lyons & Rice, 2014).

Nguyen, Steel, and Ferrari (2013) suggested that procrastination is prevalent in the workplace and can cost an organization both productivity and financial resources. The researchers found that people who are chronic procrastinators also often have lower paying jobs and jobs in which they report having lower intrinsic motivation. Procrastination has also been associated with a person's inability to regulate themselves effectively, particularly in situations of high stress or heavy workloads (Klassen, Krawchuk, & Rajani, 2008). Klassen, Krawchuk, and Rajani (2008) found that people with higher self-esteem were less likely to become chronic procrastinators. The low self-esteem demonstrated by procrastinators directly connects with the previous concepts proposed about impostor phenomenon, specifically the lack of self-confidence that impostors experience. Additionally, the idea that procrastinators neglect duties for fear of negative evaluations (Lyons & Rice, 2014) aligns with the notion that impostors fear being viewed as incapable (Clance, 1985).

Proposition 7: Leaders who feel like impostors will be more likely to report procrastination because of low self-esteem and high rates of perfectionism.

Theoretical Model of Leadership Impostor phenomenon

The literature presented in the previous sections demonstrated connections between IP characteristics proposed by Clance (1985) and Mount and Tardanico (2014). The researchers proposed that impostors, people who experience impostor phenomenon, are typically successful, high achievers. The model suggested that when leaders experience the fear of failure, they will lack confidence in their ability to continue to work at the same level as they did when they achieved success. The fear of failure will likely lead to a response of perfectionism driven by the leader's need to *get it right*. The result of these behaviors is impostor phenomenon which could then lead to risk aversion, indecisiveness, and procrastination. Figure 1 presents the theoretical model of leadership impostor phenomenon beginning with high achievement and continuing through to the potential outcomes of impostor phenomenon.
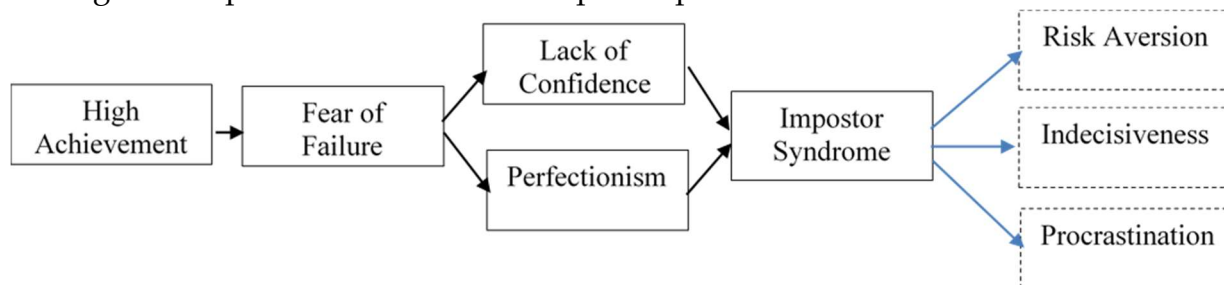
Figure 1. The model of constructs. This model details how leadership impostor phenomenon constructs connect and progress from high achievement to impostor phenomenon and continues to the negative outcomes of risk aversion, indecisiveness, and procrastination.

Conclusion and Suggestions for Future Research

This article explored current research and knowledge about impostor phenomenon and presented seven propositions about impostor phenomenon as experienced by leaders. These propositions were used to develop a theoretical causal model of the construct that begins with a leader who has demonstrated success and high achievement and includes the concepts of fear of failure, lack of confidence, and perfectionism which leads to impostor phenomenon. Impostor phenomenon then results in risk aversion, indecisiveness, and procrastination. Researchers initially suggested that impostor phenomenon was more common in women than in men (Clance, 1985), but more recent investigations have shown that men and women may experience the phenomenon at similar rates (Chrisman, Pieper, Clance, Holland and Glickauf-Hughes, 1995).

Further research could test this model with leaders from a variety of backgrounds to determine if the model has empirical validity. Research can also further explore strategies for how leaders might overcome impostor phenomenon, as well as how some leaders might cope with the construct. Mount and Tardanico (2014) suggested that in some cases positive results can emerge from a person's focus on the details due to their fear of failure. Researchers could also explore the model and study potential impostors to understand if any positive outcomes may result from leaders feeling as though they are impostors. Rohrmann, Bechtoldt, and Leonhardt (2016) suggested that most of the empirical research about IP was conducted with graduate students. This finding highlights the opportunity that exists to study the concept in workplaces further and specifically identify the effects it has on organizational leaders.

About the Author
Elaina Range Jackson earned her Ph.D. in organizational leadership at Regent University and holds a Master of Science in Business Management from Belhaven University. Elaina has more than 15 years of direct experience in nonprofit management, serving in various marketing, development, and project management leadership roles. She is a wife and mother of four.

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