

IMPOSTOR SYNDROME:

WHAT IS AND WHAT IMPACT DOES IT HAVE?

A Virtual Workshop of the National Academies

Committee on Women in Science, Engineering, and Medicine

Thursday, May 19

1-4 PM ET

Impostor Syndrome (also known as impostor phenomenon) refers to a person's persistent belief that, despite outstanding academic and professional accomplishments, "they are really not bright and have fooled anyone who thinks otherwise."¹ The concept originated from a 1978 study by psychologists Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes of high-achieving women. The number of publications on this topic has grown exponentially, both in peer-reviewed literature and popular media, over the last decade. While the research findings are mixed regarding gender differences in the prevalence of impostor syndrome, early studies linked this phenomenon to women. Some recent work has focused on understanding impostor syndrome in employed and student populations, evaluating its relationship to educational and workplace performance, however, many questions about the nature and impact of impostor syndrome remain. Recently, some scholars have raised important questions about whether this phenomenon is an issue that should be addressed at an individual or organizational level and whether reported experiences of impostor beliefs actually reflect bias and discrimination in educational and work environments. Still other studies have found positive outcomes associated with impostor beliefs. This workshop will seek to explore the many facets of this issue.

1 PM **Welcome from Gilda Barabino, Chair of the Committee on Women in Science, Engineering, and Medicine**

Gilda Barabino (NAE/NAM), President, Olin College of Engineering, chair of the NASEM Committee on Women in Science, Engineering, and Medicine

1:05 PM **Introductory remarks from May Berenbaum: the Growing Scholarship and Public Interest in Impostor Syndrome**

May Berenbaum (NAS), Professor and Head of Entomology, Professor of Plant Biology, Swanlund Chair, School of Integrative Biology, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, member of the NASEM Committee on Women in Science, Engineering, and Medicine

¹ Clance, P. R. & Imes, S. A. The Imposter Phenomenon in High Achieving Women: Dynamics and Therapeutic Intervention. *Psychother. Theory Res. Pract.* 15, 241–247 (1978).

1:10 PM

Prevalence, Predictors, and Treatment of Impostor Syndrome: The Results of a Systematic Review

Dena M. Bravata, Co-Founder Lyra Health; CHP/PCOR Research Associate, Stanford University School of Medicine

Moderator: May Berenbaum (NAS), Professor and Head of Entomology, Professor of Plant Biology, Swanlund Chair, School of Integrative Biology, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, member of the NASEM Committee on Women in Science, Engineering, and Medicine

Dr. Bravata will review the results of a systematic review of the peer-reviewed literature on impostor syndrome and findings from the lay literature. She will discuss the evidence on whether impostor symptoms are more common among women, minority groups, and young professionals and the implications for interventions both by mental health professionals and managers in the workplace.

1:40 PM

The Impostor Phenomenon Revisited: Examining the Silver Lining of Having Workplace Impostor Thoughts

Basima Tewfik, Assistant Professor, Work and Organization Studies, MIT Sloan

Moderator: Manuel Perez-Quinones, Professor of Software and Information Systems at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, member of the NASEM Committee on Women in Science, Engineering, and Medicine

Dr. Tewfik will review her recent research that challenges the prevailing wisdom that experiencing the impostor phenomenon is uniformly detrimental. After reviewing the conceptual history of the phenomenon, she will advance “workplace impostor thoughts” as a term that better captures the phenomenon’s core definitional features. She will then discuss four studies that show that those who have “workplace impostor thoughts” receive higher ratings of interpersonal effectiveness at work. Dr. Tewfik will conclude by delineating the theoretical and practical implications that emerge from her work that documents this interpersonal upside.

2:10 PM

The Role of Impostorism in Maintaining Structural Racism in STEM

Ebony McGee, Professor of Education, Diversity and STEM Education, Department of Teaching and Learning, Vanderbilt University

Moderator: Gilda Barabino, (NAE/NAM), President, Olin College of Engineering, chair of the NASEM Committee on Women in Science, Engineering, and Medicine

Dr. McGee will speak to how the present conceptualization of impostor phenomenon is problematic because it generally fails to consider how these processes are shaped by interactions and structures, as mechanisms that allow impostorism to thrive in the STEM ecosystem. Thus, impostor phenomenon/‘impostor syndrome’ ignores and grossly minimizes institutional factors, policies, and practices that cause minoritized STEM

people to logically respond with distress and frustration, requiring dangerously high effort coping or leaving STEM.

2:40 PM Discriminatory Gaslighting and the Impostor Effect

Christy Pichichero, Associate Professor of French and History, Past President, Western Society for French History, Director of Faculty Diversity, College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Moderator: Leslie Gonzales, Associate Professor in the Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Learning Unit in the College of Education, Michigan State University, member of the NASEM Committee on Women in Science, Engineering, and Medicine

Dr. Pichichero will discuss the concept of “discriminatory gaslighting,” an expression that she coined in 2021, to engage participants in examining the root causes of what is commonly understood as the impostor phenomenon. By reframing the analysis to focus on cultural and systemic inequities and their effects, this session aims to empower women with strategies to challenge barriers and foster an environment in which everyone can thrive.

3:10 PM Panel Discussion

Speakers will engage in a panel discussion and reflect upon key considerations in the current and future research on the topic of impostor syndrome. The speakers will consider how the context of the COVID-19 pandemic raise additional questions and issues for consideration in research and practice.

Moderator: Ashley Bear, Director, Committee on Women in Science, Engineering, and Medicine, National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine

4:00 PM Closing Remarks and Adjourn