

Why Do Good Students Believe They Are Impostors?

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Introduction

Many students experience a sense of being a fraud with fear of being exposed. This experience, called impostor phenomenon, has been associated with deficits in self-acceptance, environmental mastery, and general well-being in college students.

This study investigated whether personality dimensions and achievement anxiety significantly explained variability of the impostor phenomenon in college students.

Method

Participants

We had 61 consenting undergraduate college students (77% women), mean age 20.33, $SD = 1.10$. years.

Procedures and Materials

We obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board. We sent online questionnaires to 100 college students via email. Data was collected anonymously.

Our variables and measures were:

Personality: Short form of the International Personality Item Pool (Mini-IPIP; Baldasano et al. 2013). Subscales:

- Neuroticism (calm, confident vs. anxious, pessimistic),
- Extraversion (reserved, thoughtful vs. sociable, fun-loving),
- Intellect (prefers routine, practical vs. imaginative, spontaneous),
- Agreeableness (suspicious, uncooperative vs. trusting, helpful),
- Consciousness (impulsive, disorganized vs. disciplined, careful).

Achievement Anxiety: Achievement Anxiety Test (Alpert & Haber, 1960). Subscales:

- Debilitating Anxiety (affects academic performance negatively)
- Facilitating Anxiety (affects academic performance positively)

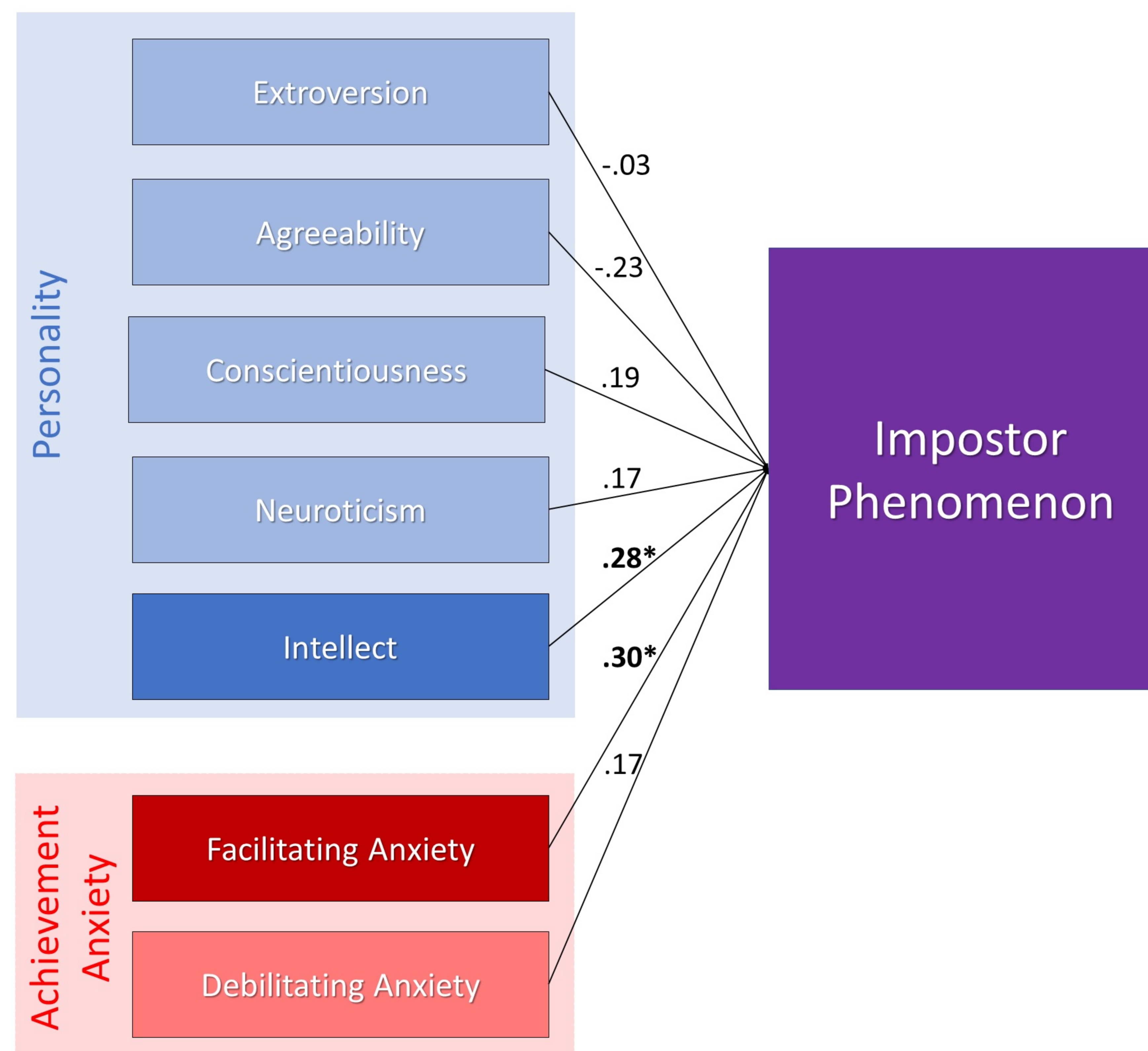
Impostor Phenomenon: Impostor Phenomenon Scale (Clance, 1985).

Results

Regression analysis showed personality factors and achievement anxiety explained 27% of variability in impostor phenomenon, $Adj. R^2 = .171$, $F(7,53) = 2.764$, $p = .016$. The results did not change substantially when age, gender, and ethnicity were maintained constant.

Figure 1

The personality dimension of Intellect (imaginative, spontaneous, open to new experiences), and facilitating anxiety explain significant variability of the Impostor Syndrome.



Note. Indices are β s. * $p < .05$.

Conclusion

Our results suggest that:

- 1) The students most likely to struggle with a sense of being fake are those who show:
 - a. Elevated openness to new experiences and learning, and
 - b. Elevated anxiety that promotes high academic achievement.
- 2) Teaching methods that diffuse anxiety may be helpful to foster confidence, especially for highly motivated, high achieving students.
- 3) The introduction of activities aiming at relaxation may be helpful to students who are high achievers at the expense of their own wellbeing.

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