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Unpacking the Imposter Syndrome and Mental Health as a Person of Color and First-Generation College Student within Institutions of Higher Education

Biography

After completing her Bachelor of Arts degree in Behavioral Science, Ling hopes to pursue a career in the field of Higher Education-Student Affairs and work towards her ultimate goal of completing her Ph.D. in Educational Leadership. Her roles at San José State University as a Peer Mentor at Peer Connections and an In Solidarity Program Assistant at the Cesar E. Chavez Community Action Center have strongly influenced her passion for working with students of color at institutions of higher education. In addition, her participation in the NASPA Undergraduate Fellows Program (NUFP) has allowed her to expand her professional experience in the field of Student Affairs through internships, conferences, and presentations throughout different regions in the United States. As a future professional in the field, Ling hopes to positively impact first-generation college students through her research and service in Student Affairs.

Unpacking the Imposter Syndrome and Mental Health as a Person of Color First Generation College Student within Institutions of Higher Education

Abstract

Extant literature on Imposter syndrome primarily focuses on Asian Americans. This current review of literature seeks to make a comparison of Imposter syndrome between two marginalized communities – Asian Americans and African Americans. Imposter syndrome, also referred to as the imposter phenomenon, refers to an individual who doubts their own skills, abilities, successes, and overall capabilities in their life (Parkman, 2016). Asian American students are stereotyped as the model minority and are believed to be intelligent, hardworking, high achieving, and academic and seen to be free from any emotional or adaptive problems. Although these stereotypes are perceived to be positive, they also place a great deal of pressure on Asian American students to excel in school and this can produce increased anxiety and distress. Among African-Americans, shame-proneness manifests differently. It is directly related to a fear of intimacy and self-deprecation (Austin, 2009). Researchers looking at the relationship between Imposter syndrome and mental health among student populations have found it to be a predictor of mental health, it has been found to be positively correlated with anxiety, depression, psychological distress, and minority student status stress (Parkman, 2016). This review will seek to answer which of the two aforesaid stated student populations of first-generation students, Asian American and African American experience a greater detriment in mental health and if there are any specific patterns of mental symptoms of psychological distress that are found among each of these student populations.

Introduction

My research focuses on imposter syndrome, students of color, first-generation college students, and personal relationships. The imposter syndrome, also referred to as the imposter phenomenon, refers to an individual who doubts their own skills, abilities, successes, and overall capabilities in their life. In the past, research has been conducted on how college students categorize into different levels of imposter syndrome, yet many college-aged students are not aware of the term. The research I am conducting asks the question - How do relationships impact first-generation college students' imposter syndrome and can it influence their success? This question aims to explore and allow educators to understand what leads to students behaving in healthy or unhealthy ways with their family, friends, partners, co-workers, supervisors, and so forth. In addition, it explores the emotional support that first-generation college students need to be confident in their academic and personal goals.

In order to fully understand and break down the research question, it is important to unpack the definitions of each concept that my question examines. For purposes of my research, first-generation college students will be defined as current college students whose parents did not graduate from a four-year university. Imposter syndrome or phenomenon as defined earlier will examine how individuals are impacted by their own self-doubt and overall competence in their success. The research will examine the influence of relationships that students hold with family and academic professors, advisors, or mentors. Relationship factors that will be examined will include communication, emotional support, and happiness. This research is intended to examine what leads to students identifying with the imposter syndrome and if their relationships have a strong influence on them.

Another question my research unpacks is "How do different students of color encounter this syndrome differently?" Within this question, there are also several components that must be unpacked that focus on students from two specific communities: Asian Americans and African Americans. I will also address some points on Latinx communities and how this community may relate or differ when compared to others.

My proposed research addresses existing questions in the literature by finding out what specifically influences the imposter syndrome and

how those who are affected by it can utilize those around them to overcome it. Specifically, it would allow us to understand what types of students are impacted the most by this phenomenon and how to help current students realize the importance of healthy relationships in their lives. This work is important because college students are generally at times in their lives where they develop intimate, emotional, and personal relationships that influence their higher education and mental development. The literature already acknowledges the importance of having support from an institution towards college students, however, we must understand if these resources will have an impact on students if they are not encouraged to utilize them by people in their lives. As a person of color, myself, I have come to understand the importance of knowing how institutions support my community as well as others as students navigate their experience during their undergraduate journey.

Through literature that focuses on imposter syndrome, I hypothesize that first-generation students are influenced by personal relationships in their lives that either develop or help them overcome the imposter syndrome. Cokley (2013) stated students surround themselves with positive and healthy relationships with family, academic professors, advisors, and mentors then they will be more confident in their own abilities. However, with the presence of negative or toxic relationships in their lives, individuals will strengthen their imposter syndrome. First generation students are less likely to have healthier personal relationships in their lives or support compared to later generation students (Lutwak, 1998).

Origins of the Imposter Syndrome

Studies on imposter syndrome were first conducted in the late 1970s and 1980s. In order to conduct early studies, there were three common main surveys/questionnaires that were used to determine levels of imposterism. In his research, Leary emphasized three different types of studies conducted on the same group of participants over a period of time. All three studies utilized the Imposterism Scale to test their theories which explored how individuals who ranked high with imposter syndrome followed the self-fulfilling prophecy and observation (Leary, 2000). For the purposes of this literature review, I will focus on one study that I found

most useful that asked the question - Do imposters react as they are expected to when they know they are being observed by strangers? The study tested this theory in multiple ways; one where participants were believed that they were being observed positively and another negatively. Results revealed the imposters would, in fact, behave in the way the observers expected of them when completing tasks. The participants would either complete their task correctly or incorrectly when they learned how challenging or easy a task was expected to be.

Gradually, as the phenomenon became more prevalent in the field of higher education and in the workplace, theories and understandings surrounding it evolved and had a stronger focus from college institutions. Research on the phenomenon expanded to studies related to gender, people of color, culture, mental health, and even environment surroundings (Clancy, 2018). Despite efforts to understand and expand research on imposter syndrome, researchers must continue to discover solutions to help marginalized communities overcome this phenomenon.

In the past, it was believed the imposter syndrome was an issue that women encountered more than men, however, it has been revealed that gender does not play a key role in determining who encounters the syndrome more. From later studies conducted by Jacobs, both men and women confront the syndrome just as equally when not looking at ethnic communities (Jacobs, 2014). However, from their studies, mental health issues remained consistent in the studies that will be further expanded in multiple ethnic groups. Some mental health symptoms that revealed to be salient include symptoms of depression, anxiety, and generally lower self-confidence.

Asian Americans Communities

Previous research has revealed immigrant and minority communities are less likely to utilize mental health services compared to US-born Americans. Abe (2007) focused his study on Asian immigrants which revealed the community does not generally utilize mental health services or bring up the topic within their nuclear families. Abe (year) wanted to determine the reasons why these immigrant Asian immigrants utilized or failed to utilize mental health services and how it affected their communities. Some of his goals were to determine rates of mental health-

related service use among immigrants and U.S. citizens were utilized, what patterns present among the immigrant population, and if the individuals satisfied with the mental health services they received. Abe's (2007) research believed U.S. immigrants were less likely to utilize even when suggested by a professional compared to a U.S.-born individual who came from the same ethnic background.

Participants of the study were from Asian communities. The qualitative study included face to face or phone call interviews over a 12-month period. Over this period, participants would undergo a series of tests from doctors, psychiatrists, and other professionals to determine if they needed mental health care. The main results concluded that first generation immigrants did not utilize mental health services as much as second-generation Asian Americans. Asian Americans followed similar patterns to first-generation immigrants than third generation Asian Americans. A number of factors indicated that mental health was not considered as great of importance to first-generation immigrants. However, those who did utilize the services had satisfactory rates of service and those with a probable need concluded they were content with their experience.

However, some limitations of the study included that some Asian American populations were lumped together even though they had different languages and backgrounds. The study was very narrow when looking at Asian Americans because within the community there are more cultural groups. It also did not take into account, language, economic background, or regional variations.

Consequently, when Asian American communities do not take advantage of mental health resources or have access to general education on the topic, they are at greater risk for imposter syndrome. This can become prevalent within Asian Americans as they enter college-level education and encounter internal challenges without the skills or knowledge to effectively address them (Liem, 1997).

Latinx/Chicanx Communities

Challenges with depression and anxiety among first-generation Latinx communities arose from experiences of migration among Latinx adolescents. Hunt (2010) focused on specific topics that impact the

academic development of these communities through topics of acculturation, migration, documentation status, depression, anxiety, and discrimination. Specifically, Hunt (2010) determined how immigration and acculturation impact the well-being of Latino adolescents and their mental health.

Hunt (2010) predicted individuals with undocumented statuses and those with traumatic migration experiences are more prone to show mental health symptoms and require additional support from their institutions. The participants used in the study came from middle and high schools in North Carolina identified as first-generation Latino youth with parents who were foreign-born. Some health measures that were identified were depression and anxiety. Mental health stressors that were measured were migration experiences and discrimination. The control variables looked at both age and gender, with a parent, education, family composition, and Mexican heritage with little variation (Hunt, 2010).

The results concluded that individuals who were more prone to depression and anxiety came from backgrounds where they themselves and their family did not have legal documentation. Those who did not have much say in their migration to the United States and faced discrimination at school were also more prone to these stressors and mental health-related issues. However, those with good support systems in their family and education showed reduced symptoms of stress, depression, and anxiety. Some limitations of the study included the focus on mainly the Mexican American community; there was no specific analysis on other Hispanic populations. An implication is that the study did not take into account individuals who were not enrolled in school and excluded individuals who dropped out.

Similar to the results of Asian American communities, Latinx/Chicanx communities encountered challenges to imposter syndrome. However, adding to the research of Hunt (2010) and Leyva (2011) found that Latinx students pursuing higher education had greater pressures compared to non-students of color from their family to be successful in their academic pursuits. The ideas of professional development while addressing traditional family/gender roles contributed to stressors individuals in these communities who came from first-

generation backgrounds.

African Americans/Black Communities

Cokley (2013), compared to Asian American communities, those who identify as African American or Black encounter higher levels of barriers to academic success when assessing the impacts of imposter syndrome. These communities encounter the same challenges of depression, anxiety, and lack of support. However, African American and Black individuals feel they encounter additional racism and discrimination from their institution or place of employment when they are in academic or professional spaces. Often times, these individuals feel misunderstood or feel that they do not have support to reach out and ask for help from superiors, peers, or even faculty members on their campus. This continues to be a challenge for members of this community despite efforts to be more inclusive in spaces where there are few minority students.

In addition to a feeling of lack of support, members of this community may have a much more challenging time if they try to overcome the phenomenon on their own (Liem, 1997). Folks from this community are more inclined to feel shame and distrust which negatively impacts how they form relationships with individuals in their career or within their institutions of higher education. Those who have imposter syndrome throughout their development in academia also have higher rates of encountering prejudice from others and resent those who may appear to do well when unconsciously comparing themselves to peers or colleagues (Cokley, 2013).

First-Generation College Students and Mental Health

On college campuses, non-first-generation students report a greater sense of belonging, on average, lower levels of depression/stress compared with first-generation students who had lower levels of sense of belonging and greater levels of depression/stress. First-generation students need but not use services at a higher rate than non-first generation students (Demetriou, 2017).

As discussed in previous research, underrepresented populations underutilize college resources which impact their sense of belonging especially for first-generation college students. Stebleton (2014)

questioned how much mental health services were used by specific populations on college campuses. Overall, Stebleton hypothesized first-generation college students and people of color do not take advantage of mental health services offered on college campuses. To conduct this research, they surveyed 150 students at six large public research institutions. The findings revealed first-generation students ranked low on sense of belonging and high on levels of depression and stress. When compared to non-first-generation students, they also used fewer counseling services (Stebleton 2014). As opposed to previous articles, the research concludes how communication between students and school faculty or administrators is vital to understand how students feel like they belong on campus.

Additional research (citations) also argued college students who are at risk for mental disorders are increasing dramatically compared to individuals who are not enrolled in school. With an emphasis on college student mental health and broader adolescent and young adult populations, Hunt and Eisenberg (2010) looked at the comparisons in individuals who are enrolled in college and who are not and how they seek assistance for mental health-related topics. They predicted that the current state of mental health in the college student population is low, the risk factors among college students are high, mental health in this population will continue to worsen over the years, and the extent to which students receive mental health services is low. The main results of the study concluded that college students were more prone to develop depression compared to non-college students. The findings were supported by existing research and concluded that the overall commonness of mental disorders has remained at a steady and moderate increase over time. Hunt and Eisenberg (2010) predicted that college students with addiction problems such as drugs and alcohol were less inclined to seek out treatment and ignore their mental health. As compared to barriers such as lack of time, privacy concerns, emotional openness, and financial constraints that prevent students from utilizing mental health services.

In McGowan's (2015) study, he hypothesized that students who are most likely to suffer mental health issues were more likely to be older, low-income, married and have dependents, to enroll in college as part-time students, to enroll in public two-year institutions, private for-profit

institutions, and other institutions that required less than four years before earning a degree/certificate, rated obtaining needed financial aid, expediting the completion of coursework, being able to live at home, and being able to work while attending school as important influences in their decision to enroll at a particular institution. In the study that was conducted, the research focused on first-year students at a four-day leadership retreat they attended before they started classes at their university. The mental health factors they consider were comprised of anxiety, mood disorders, and depression. Their research focused on the development of the students or as they are called campers in the study and how well they understood mental health as a whole. It revealed that in past years there have been great strides to ensure students obtain the proper resources needed on their college campuses. Yet, with the growing population of college students, there still remains a social problem of mental health and those who have access to those resources (McGowan, 2015).

Support from Institutions

Researchers Kumar and Jagacinski (2005) reveal how individuals with the imposter syndrome are impacted by fears they hold toward their achievements. The authors proposed the question that asked if imposter syndrome related fears were connected to a student's ability to achieve goals. Their process used the Clance Imposter Phenomenon Scale where they distributed surveys to over 100 psychology students. The findings that were concluded from the research confirmed their hypothesis that fears and the imposter syndrome are motivated by an underlying fear of failure that influences how imposters construct their goals. They also discovered imposters compare themselves to others and develop an idea where they motivate themselves to outperform others to feel competent (Kumar and Jagacinski 2005).

Chapman's research also contributes to studies on how factors such as a sense of belonging, financial stability, and support of an institution can impact how much confidence a mature student has in college. For this particular study, a mature student is defined as a student who is 21 years or older. Chapman hypothesized mature students are more at risk for imposter syndrome and prompts the question of how mature

students find support at their college. The study used groups of students from around the United States from different majors, these students were interviewed in person multiple times throughout an academic year. The research focused on themes that were consistent in the interviews and identified prominent issues or challenges the participants shared (Chapman, 2017).

Findings revealed students primarily expressed fear in their academic performance and feared they were judged harshly by their professors if their assignments were not perfect. Consequently, this fear increased pressure from themselves and raised anxiety levels in their own performance and confidence. Chapman also concluded that not only academic staff influenced the participants, but also peer groups such as classmates or friends (Chapman 2017).

Discussion

Intersectional experiences and salient identities have a strong influence on how imposter syndrome impacts cultures and communities differently. Even though many young adults and adolescents encounter the phenomenon early on or when they start school or a new job, there are those who can overcome it. It is necessary that these individuals receive support from mentors, professors, and programs within their institutions. Research has also found that the relationships students develop within their early years of college can have a direct impact on their academic performance. When students have direct personal support, they are less likely to experience imposter syndrome.

As discussed, the roles of mental health, relationships, cultural background have an overall impact on how a student may overcome the imposter syndrome. It can be said that all students of color encounter challenges and even discrimination, but their experiences are different and it is vital to understand how they differ from one another in order to support them effectively. The implications of finding solutions include promoting the use of college counselors at institutions. Solutions to counter this phenomenon include possibly partnering with classrooms to provide proper mental health promotion and awareness. The use of peer mentors and educators would allow students to feel more comfortable

sharing their feelings with and help promote a stronger sense of belonging and address mental health concerns (Luedke, 2017).

Conclusion

Ultimately, imposter syndrome still continues to be a broad research topic that impacts multiple populations of students, workers, and other individuals in society. As research continues to develop and grow on this concept, it will allow those who are presented with this information to use it as a resource and assist those who are impaired by it. People of color are impacted more by the imposter syndrome compared to non-people of color both mentally and academically. The intersectionalities of mental health and people of color are salient when researching and understanding this phenomenon. It is the responsibility of an institution to assess the needs of their students and provide accessible equitable resources to help them overcome their own challenges. First generation college students and people of color are more likely to confront the hardships that come with the imposter syndrome. Fortunately, institutions of higher education have the means to support these types of students not only academically, but mentally as well as personally.

Ethnic identity groups including Asian Americans, Latinx/Chicanx Americans, and African American/Black community members are strong cultural groups that can be easily overlooked or disregarded by dominant organizations in our society. However, it is important to understand these communities react and develop personal relationships differently depending upon their diverse cultural backgrounds. Overcoming and unpacking the imposter syndrome in the context of institutions of higher education may be a challenging task itself. Yet, it is important to execute continued research to help those who come from marginalized backgrounds in a holistic approach to student development.

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