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THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON STUDENTS'
PERCEPTIONS OF IMPOSTER SYNDROME: AN
EXPLORATORY STUDY APPLIED TO HIGH-
ACHIEVING ASIAN FEMALE HIGH SCHOOL
STUDENTS IN NEW YORK CITY

KANG, JONG-GU ET AL

DEPARTMENT OF ELEMENTARY SPECIAL EDUCATION

DAEGU UNIVERSITY

GYEONSANGBUK-DO, SOUTH KOREA

Prof. Jong-Gu Kang
Department of Elementary Special Education
Daegu University
Gyeongsangbuk-do, Republic of Korea

Ms. Livia Fang
Forest Hills High School
Queens, NY

Ms. Megan Fang
Queens High School for the Sciences at York College
Jamaica, NY

The Impact of COVID-19 on Students' Perceptions of Imposter Syndrome: An Exploratory Study Applied to High-Achieving Asian Female High School Students in New York City

Synopsis:

Imposter syndrome is a mental health issue that affects how individuals depict themselves and is often delineated through their feelings of inadequacy and incompetence despite evidence of success and achievement. With COVID-19, students in New York City have been taking virtual classes for about a year already. Virtual schooling usually allows students to converse with their teachers and fellow classmates through video conferencing and internet chatting, but it also does not allow any physical or face-to-face interaction of any kind. This study attempted to investigate the perceptions of the high-achieving female Asian students regarding imposter syndrome and the impact of the virtual learning due to COVID-19 on students' perceptions of the imposter syndrome.

Abstract

This study attempted to investigate the perceptions of the high-achieving female Asian students regarding imposter syndrome and the impact of the virtual learning due to COVID-19 on students' perceptions of the imposter syndrome. A total of 250 high-achieving Asian female students from high schools in New York City participated in this study. The results of this study show that high-achieving Asian female high school students in New York City have the imposter syndrome as a common perception among them. The family value on education is the major factor contributing to students' perceptions of imposter syndrome. This study also found that the virtual learning due to COVID-19 strengthened the feelings that lead to the perception of the high-achieving Asian female high school students with imposter syndrome.

Keywords: Asian, COVID-19, Female, High-Achieving, Imposter Syndrome

Introduction

Imposter syndrome is a mental health issue that affects how individuals depict themselves and is often delineated through their feelings of inadequacy and incompetence despite evidence of success and achievement. The term is used to designate an internal experience of intellectual phoniness (Clance & Imes, 1978). The imposter syndrome causes self-esteem and self-confidence to be undermined and eroded (Wyatt, Chin, Milburn, Hamilton, Lopez, & Kim, et al., 2019).

Some studies have shown that 70% of millennials suffer from imposter syndrome and women are more often affected than men, taking in account of the “stereotype backlash” that men are more assertive and confident and are less likely to feel imposed or to reveal their insecurities (Kang, Fang, & Zheng, 2018). Societal stereotypes are often the cause for women diagnosed with imposter syndrome. Since women have lower expectations placed upon them, they tend to attribute their successes to temporary causes, like luck or effort, in contrast to men who are more likely to attribute their successes to the internal, stable factor of ability. Because of the low expectations women have for their own performances, they have apparently internalized into a self-stereotype the societal sex-role stereotype that they are not considered competent (Clance & Imes, 1978). Some women see themselves as unworthy of the level of praise they are receiving because they do not believe they have earned such recognition based on their capabilities (Parkman, 2016). The frequency of the imposter syndrome in women has led to the underachievement of gifted females and the male dominance in mathematics and science (Reis, 2004).

Asian Americans are typically viewed as hard-working and academically successful in the United States. The stereotypes derived from Asian Americans being seen as the model

minority make Asian Americans out to be intelligent and high-achieving. While 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 (Le, 2019). Some Asian Americans experience the impostor phenomenon because they are unable to meet such high expectations from their peers, teachers, and some family members (Kwan, 2015). Although Asian Americans are perceived as the model minority, they live in a white-dominated country, and are still minority. An inevitable effect of learning and working in a white-dominated education system as a minority are feelings of insecurity or self-doubt (Ahmed., Cruz, Kaushal, Kobuse, & Wang, 2020). The aforementioned feelings of insecurity and self-doubt can be possible causes of impostor syndrome.

Studies have shown that the impostor syndrome is found more often in high-achieving students than normal students. Despite their outstanding academic accomplishments, students who experience the impostor phenomenon persist in believing that they are really not bright and have fooled anyone who thinks otherwise (Clance & Imes, 1978). And in specialized high schools in New York City, the schools breed an environment of high pressure and intense competition amongst one another. The pressure and competition set high expectations for the students. These specialized high schools discuss the impostor syndrome mostly in mental health classes and instruct on how to overcome it. By doing so the schools are recognizing the impostor syndrome as a major ailment among their students and attesting to the fact that impostor syndrome is very much affected by the intensely competitive environment these schools host (Kang, et al, 2018).

Research papers on the impostor syndrome regarding high-achieving female Asian students were mostly conducted with the students in an in-person school setting. But with

COVID-19, students in New York City have been taking virtual classes for about a year already. Virtual schooling usually allows students to converse with their teachers and fellow classmates through video conferencing and internet chatting, but it also does not allow any physical or face-to-face interaction of any kind. This study attempted to investigate the perceptions of the high-achieving female Asian students regarding imposter syndrome and the impact of the virtual learning due to COVID-19 on students' perceptions of the imposter syndrome.

Method

Participants

There was a total of 250 study participants who were Asian female students from varying high schools in New York City. 125 of the students are from specialized high schools and another 125 with GPA higher than 3.8 are from regular high schools in New York City. In New York City, a test called the SHSAT (Specialized High School Admission Test) is provided for students of the city as an opportunity to attend a school for gifted students. Students from high schools in Brooklyn, Queens, Manhattan, and the Bronx participated in filling out the survey. The participants are all high achieving, with high grade point averages. Most of the students are second generation immigrants, a large portion of the students who have filled out the survey are of Chinese descent. A few are of South and Southeast Asian descent. All of the participants are current high schoolers and are now doing remote learning due to COVID-19. All participants have experienced in person learning as well as online learning.

Measures

A survey was given out for the participants to fill out. Students were first asked to fill out information about their school name, race, and gender. Within the survey, factors such as the student's self image, student's confidence, and family value on education were assessed on a 5-

point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. All of the questions had follow-up questions asking how their feelings have changed since Covid-19, whether or not their feelings have grown stronger, weaker, or stayed the same. Three factors with eigenvalues greater than one were extracted and construct validity was supported for this instrument with the percent of explained variance calculated to be 72%. In addition, the Cronbach's alpha as the estimate of reliability of this instrument is 93%.

Findings

Imposter Syndrome Perceived from Students

Table 1 shows the extent in which students perceived themselves regarding the imposter syndrome in terms of three categories: Self image, confidence, and family value on education. The average of the students' responses on the questions across all of the three categories is 3.59 out of 5, showing that high-achieving Asian female students generally perceived the imposter syndrome in themselves. Out of the three categories mentioned before, family value on education scored the highest, with a 4.14, as shown in Table 1, whereas the student's self image category scored the lowest, with a 3.20. This indicates that the main reason for why high-achieving Asian female students perceive the imposter syndrome in themselves comes from their families. In contrast to their family value on education, the student's self image is not a major reason as to why high-achieving Asian female students perceive the imposter syndrome in themselves.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Imposter Syndrome Perceived from Students

The rest of Table 1 shows the percentages of how the students felt about the aforementioned categories since virtual learning due to COVID-19. There are three types of student's feelings: Stronger, weaker, and stayed the same. As shown in Table 1, the responses of the "stronger" and "stayed the same" took up the majority of the percentages, with "stronger"

TABLE 1

Means of Perceived Imposter Syndrome and Percentage of Perceived Impact From Covid-19

		Student's Self Image	Student's Confidence	Family Value on Education	Total
Imposter Syndrome	M	3.20	3.62	4.14	3.59
COVID-19 Stronger	%	39.29%	41.67%	41.07%	40.63%
COVID-19 Stayed the Same	%	44.05%	47.62%	44.64%	45.54%
COVID-19 Weaker	%	15.48%	8.33%	8.93%	11.16%

Note. The means are ranging from 1-5.

having a 40.63% and “stayed the same” having a 45.54%. The “weaker” division only took up an 11.16% out of the total percentage. In other words, approximately 40% of the high-achieving Asian female students had stronger feelings in regard to the imposter syndrome since virtual learning due to COVID-19. In addition, approximately only 11% of the high-achieving Asian female students had weaker feelings in regard to the imposter syndrome since virtual learning due to COVID-19.

For the “stronger” response, the three categories of self image, confidence, and family value on education took up approximately 39.29%, 41.67%, and 41.07% of the total percentage,

respectively. The three percentages are very close and do not indicate any significant difference. This means that the high-achieving Asian female students had similarly stronger feelings across all three categories since virtual learning due to COVID-19.

For the "stay the same" responses, the three categories of self image, confidence, and family value on education took up approximately 44.05%, 47.62%, and 45.54% of the total percentages, respectively. The three percentages are very close and do not indicate any significant difference. This means that the high-achieving Asian female students had similar feelings of "staying the same" across all three categories since virtual learning due to COVID-19.

Finally, for the "weaker" responses, the three categories of self image, confidence, and family value on education took up approximately 15.48%, 8.33%, and 8.93% of the total percentages, respectively. The percentage of the student's self image is the highest among the others, meaning that the virtual learning due to COVID-19 had the least impact on students as compared to the other two categories, student's confidence and family value on education.

Discussion

Imposter Syndrome Perceived from Students

The results from this study indicate that high-achieving Asian female students generally perceived the imposter syndrome in themselves. The finding is similar to other studies done regarding the imposter syndrome found frequently in high-achieving female students (Clance & Imes, 1978). There have also been studies done on Asian students that show how the imposter syndrome is frequent among them (Kwan, 2015), and how high-achieving Asian female students are more likely to develop the imposter syndrome (Kang, et al, 2018).

As mentioned in the findings, out of the three categories mentioned before, family value on education had the highest percentages, whereas the student's self image category had the

lowest percentages. This denotes that the families of high-achieving Asian female students are a big factor as to why the students perceive the imposter syndrome in themselves. As opposed to educational values imposed by their families, the student's self image has the least effect on the way in which the high-achieving Asian female students perceived themselves regarding the imposter syndrome. The reason likely stems from the fact that the family value on education is passed on to the high-achieving Asian female students from their parents. In Asia, success is founded on academics. The constant urging to do better in school escalates into the need to be number one in class. The pressure inflicted on the high-achieving Asian female students affects their mental health, and they begin to develop a perception of imposter syndrome within themselves.

The Impact of COVID-19 on Imposter Syndrome Perceived from Students

The findings indicate that more of the high-achieving Asian female students had stronger feelings than the weaker feelings in regard to the imposter syndrome since virtual learning due to COVID-19. The reason being in these different circumstances, female Asian students struggle to find stability in keeping up their grades and not being able to learn in person has definitely taken a toll on their mental health. Even in the midst of such a difficult time, Asian female students must live up to their parent's expectations as well as meeting their standards. In many cases, they feel as if their accomplishments are not enough and that they have only done the bare minimum, thus they begin to doubt themselves. The constant need of having to do better undermines their accomplishments, into making the students feel like frauds. Students begin to question themselves and face difficulty accepting their own achievements.

Virtual learning deprives students of physical interactions with their teachers and fellow classmates, making the students feel more lonely than ever. In addition, some of the participants

are freshmen, meaning that they transitioned from in-person middle school to virtual high school. The transition most likely had a major impact on them, seeing as to how much more demanding their new high schools are compared to their old middle schools, and not to mention how they are in high school virtually. Having never seen their teachers and classmates face-to-face is most likely another factor in the strengthening feelings they have for their perceptions of the imposter syndrome within themselves.

Conclusion

The results of this study show that high-achieving Asian female high school students in New York City have the imposter syndrome as a common perception among them. The family value on education has more influence on students' perceptions of imposter syndrome than student's confidence and self image.

This study also found that the virtual learning due to COVID-19 strengthened the feelings that lead to the perceptions of the high-achieving Asian female high school students with imposter syndrome. The stronger feelings that lead to the perception of imposter syndrome appeared on all three categories: Family value on education, student's confidence, and student's self image.

Implications

As shown in this study, family value on education is seen as the most direct factor of high-achieving Asian female students perceiving the imposter syndrome. This may also be a factor affecting the student's self image and confidence. The students are molded into doubting their own accomplishments and this could likely lead them to doubt themselves in other settings. Students lose sight of their own self value and begin to feel undeserving. And when placed among their peers, the students will not feel confident enough or that their efforts were enough to

be compared to or even to compete with others. This temporary need to succeed in high school may cause long term problems that affect the student's health and social skills. Future research including the exploration of the relationship between the family value on education and student's self image and confidence would provide further insights into the complexities of the areas of inquiry this study has just touched on.

The findings of this study indicate that COVID-19 has an impact on the imposter syndrome perceived by the high-achieving Asian female students, but it is hard to explain how the virtual learning due to COVID-19 affects student's perception of imposter syndrome. Future research including a follow-up interview would allow researchers to better understand the relationship between virtual learning due to COVID-19 and student's perception of imposter syndrome.

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