

# Prevalence of Imposter Phenomenon among Saudi Female Faculty & its Roots During their Childhood: Qualitative Approach

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## Abstract

*This study explored a) the prevalence of IP among female faculty in Medina, b) family interactions and parents' influence during faculty childhood. To that end, the paper investigates parenting styles, conflicts, familial and siblings' dynamics as possible variables, which may be predictive of IP. The sample comprises 60 female faculty in Medina, age between 24 to 48 years old, with a mean age of 34.29 years (SD= 7.36). The study employed the Arabic version of Clance Imposter Phenomenon Scale and the Thematic Apperception Test. Quantitative and qualitative data research methods were used in this paper. Findings of the study's QUAN constituent reveal moderate prevalence of IP among faculty in Medina; 23.33% of the sample seem to frequently have IP thoughts and feelings. Results of the QUAL part confirm that instructors' family interactions and parents influence (parenting styles, conflicts, familial and siblings' dynamics with the subject) are predictive of IP.*

**Keywords** - Impostor phenomenon, family interactions, Thematic Apperception Test, Saudi Women.

## I. INTRODUCTION

“Bluffing” their way through life – as they see it –, they are haunted by the constant fear of exposure. With every success, they think, “I was lucky this time, fooling everyone, but will my luck hold? When will people discover that I am not up to the job?” (Kets de Vries, 2005, p. 110).

Researches conducted by (Imes, & Clance, 1988) were the first to describe the experience of fraudulent thoughts based on clinical interviews with high achiever women, sourced from their inner feelings that they do not deserve this success, low confidence in their self-competency, strong belief that they are not clever - as others think- and this prevents further success or makes them lose it. This is what was pointed at as the "Imposter Phenomenon", (IP).

Although the problem of IP is found in both, men and women, but women suffer from it more than men do. [19],[11], [9],[20],[50],[37], [18]

In an article based on five women leading in the faith-based colleges and universities, the author shares a conversation with Christine, an academic administrator who states, “I still don't understand what it is that people see that makes them feel confident in my abilities; it's just my self-confidence is still pretty shaken at times when I just stop and think, ‘I can't believe I'm doing this’” (Dahvlig, 2013, p.101).

According to [18][29] although IP has been mostly studied among students, there have been fewer researches studying the prevalence of IP among faculty despite their challenges in developing a professional identity as they move on in their career. He noted that “Impostor tendencies are alive and well among higher-education faculty...” (p. 2). Moreover, impostor tendencies may be detrimental for people's potential for career advancement, for example, by acting as an internal barrier to move up to a more senior level [49].

Furthermore, [3] stated that “What's alarming is that the more education and professional skills women acquire, the less confident we seem to feel...” (p.3). IP manifests itself in faculty in ways that are like those in other industries starting with a faculty member decreasing interaction with students, supervision, and research activities [42]. Behaviours have the potential to negatively affect teaching evaluations and beliefs of teaching effectiveness [6]. The results of study [29] do prove that faculty who struggle with impostor tendencies experience a cumulative emotional toll that places them at a much higher risk of emotional exhaustion, and thus job burnout. Scholarship might also be affected. Similar behaviour could be seen in committee work [42].

(Neureuther & Traut-Mattausch, 2017) found that IP might be a hindrance to adaptive coping behaviour and consequently promote maladaptive coping behaviour by decreasing career planning and occupational self-efficacy and increasing career decision-making difficulties. [49] Revealed potential negative impact of impostor tendencies on relevant work attitudes, job well-being, satisfaction and performance. Evaluative periods also promote impostor feelings [34].

Less evidence though has found about studies that examined the prevalence of IP among faculty members in Saudi Arabia nor in Medina in particular. Furthermore [8] added that studying IP in different environments will help us understand socio-cultural patterns which form this phenomenon.

## II. STUDY PROBLEM

Imposter Phenomenon has been linked to family interactions, parental styles and attachment [38], [13]; [46],[44], [36],[14].[11]The roots of the impostor phenomenon lie in early family relations. Typical family role assignment, being the perfect kid or having a sibling who is unarguably considered as the smart and socially adept one, contribute to impostor thoughts and feelings in adults. [35] IP thoughts are shown to be associated with conflictual and no supportive family background. Furthermore, [51], argued that parent-child relationship has long been seen as a critical source of influence on child health and adjustment across multiple developmental domains.

Parents can plant the seeds for IP either by paying too much attention to grades and academic accomplishments or by ignoring accomplishments and talents overall[52],[13]. Greater parental control/overprotection is reported to be related to higher impostor scores, and lack of care/warmth to correlate with thoughts of impostorism [46] .This finding echo that of a study conducted by [36] Additionally, Impostors are more likely to come from families that are low on cohesion, have a limited channel of expression, and have a lot of conflict and rules [7].

From another angle, [4]; [45],[25],agree that IP is connected to early attachment relationships with caregivers. Furthermore, findings of study of [21] supported that self-esteem, and impostor thoughts were found to be related to each other, also with preoccupied attachment behaviours and with the perception mother as overprotective, intrusive, controlling, not caring and rejecting.

These findings emphasize the need to examine how early family dynamics influence the development of IP.

## III. SIGNIFICANCE AND STUDY GOALS

To date, faculty development has been an underexplored area with few studies examining faculty personal experiences [30] . Furthermore, studies have examined the effects of family relations and parenting styles as roots of IP through quantitative research methodology [46], [50], [36] .

### A. Study goals:

- 1) Identify the degree to which IP is prevalent amongst female Faculty in Medina.

- 2) Examine family interactions and parent's influence during faculty's childhood as perceived by faculty; factors include: parenting styles, conflicts, including: (parenting styles, conflicts, familial and siblings' dynamics with the subject) would be positively predictive of IP.

## IV. DEFINITION OF TERMS

### A. Imposter phenomenon

Imposter phenomenon is defined as strong feelings of inferiority, incompetence, and fear of being discovered as a fraud despite significant academic and personal achievements. [11]

Also, [27] defined imposter as being the psychiatric pattern in the individual that includes inner and undeclared feelings about deep rooted sensation that deceive others and that he is not in the same mental state they think he is. This feeling is repeated each time he faces a task to be accomplished.

### B. Family Interactions

Family interactions are the most proximal means of influence among family members, and patterns of family behaviours are "isomorphic" to more general relationship dynamics, such as family roles, power, affiliations, and cohesiveness [22]. Also including (parenting styles, conflicts, familial and siblings' dynamics with the subject).

## V. METHODOLOGY

### A. Participants

Participants for the present study were 60 female faculty in Medina, who hold either a Master or Doctoral degree. Participants' age ranged from 24 to 48 years, with a mean age of 34.29 years (SD= 7.36). In terms of experience, 30% had 1 to 5 years of experience, 6.7% were from 5 to 10 years of experience, 25% were from 10 to 15 years of experience, 38.3% were 15+ years of experience. All the sample were Saudi citizens living and working inside the Kingdom. Regarding marital status, 54.5% reported that they were married, 17.2% were divorced, 28.3% were single/ never married, and 0.6% reported widowed. This sample was randomly selected; emails and electronic means of communication were used for data collection. The following figure (1) shows the majors of the sample (n= 60).

## VI. MEASURES

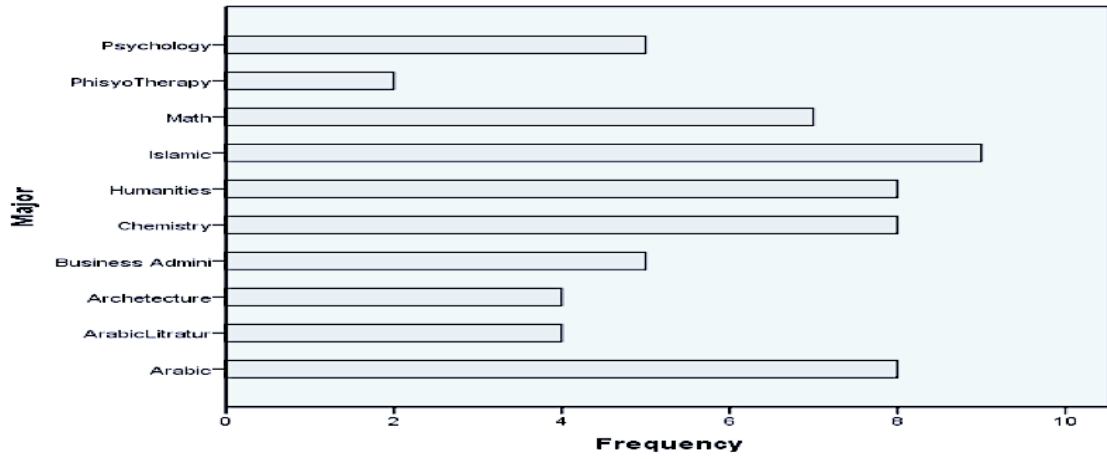
### A. Clance and Imes imposter phenomenon scale

Clance Imposter Phenomenon Scale (CIPS). The CIPS consists of 20 items that assess various aspects of IP, using a Likert-scale format [10]. Participants rate their agreement or disagreement using a 5-point scale (1 = not at all true, 2 = rarely, 3 = sometimes, 4 = often, 5 = very true). Total scores can therefore range from 20 to 100, with higher scores corresponding to more severe IP. [28]found

the CIPS had high internal consistency (coefficient alpha of .96). In comparison to the other used IP scale, the Harvey IP Scale, the CIPS has been shown to be a more reliable and sensitive instrument. (Jeledan, 2011) found that CIPS-Arabic form had high internal consistency alpha coefficient (0.76) and the test-retest coefficient was (0.73).

There are three scales which have been developed to measure the IP[24]. The first one is the Harvey IP Scale HIPS. Because of criticisms of HIPS measurement raised by researchers, [10][12]developed a second scale named the Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale CIPS.

Figure 1: The Majors of the sample



[24] Develop a third scale to measure IP named State Impostor Phenomenon Scale SIPS that measures the IP as a state. The CIPS has been translated into Japanese by (Okonogi& Ono, 1988), into German by [5], and translated into Arabic by (Jeledan, 2011) resulted in CIPS-A and also was validated by her and was used in the recent research. The scores between 41 to 60 indicate medium degrees of IP, and scores between 61-80 indicate that there is a presence of IP repeatedly.

Scores more than 80 indicate existence of this problem permanently, where a degree more than 80 indicates a high degree of IP. Duration of application is between 5 to 10 minutes.

**B. Thematic Apperception Test (TAT)**

The Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) first described by Christina Morgan & Henry Murray in 1935 [1]. The TAT shows the actual dynamics of interpersonal relationships. It reveals the testing subject's relationship to authority figures, and specific family relationships, such as the relationship between a mother and her son. The method consists of having a subject relate stories to a series of more or less ambiguous pictures in the course of which he unconsciously projects his own personal material, which can then be extracted analytically [39] these characteristics are less available to consciousness, but can be assessed by indirect measures, such as the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) [17]. The TAT, as it is more familiarly known, is thus an indirect or oblique technique for probing the inner life of an individual [26] [2]. Murray's method of evaluating the material obtained from the TAT was based on psychoanalytic theory. He

assumed that evaluation of the stories would reveal what would take many months to uncover in psychoanalysis. No overall quantitative or numerical scores were proposed [48].

Henry A. Murray also developed scoring technique, and categorized it as following five aspects of the stories: The Hero, need for the Hero, identifying the presses, scoring for themes, and scoring for outcome[16].

It is a must for the story to describe present Situation, thoughts and feelings of the character, preceding events: the events that led up to the story, final Outcome. As used in research and clinical practice, a limited number of cards are presented to a single respondent, typically no more than 10 cards. Responses purport to indicate underlying needs, motives, drives, and personality conflicts [40].

In the recent study, the researcher will use 8 cards (1, 2, 5, 7GF, 9GF, 12F, 13B, 13G) because each of these pictures more appropriate for the purpose of this study which is to reveal the roots of IP thoughts and feelings for the subject that contributed to the appearance of IP thoughts and feelings later during her adulthood, especially that related to family interactions and parent's influence during childhood from the faculty point of view, including: (parenting styles, conflicts, familial and siblings' dynamics with her). The recent author also applied a method of analysis for the TAT [16] which is based upon a theory of personality structure, with respect to the analysis of desires and action outcomes.

**C. Demographic Questionnaire**

A brief demographic questionnaire solicited information on respondents' age, marital status, years of expertise, and major area of study.

**VII. PROCEDURE**

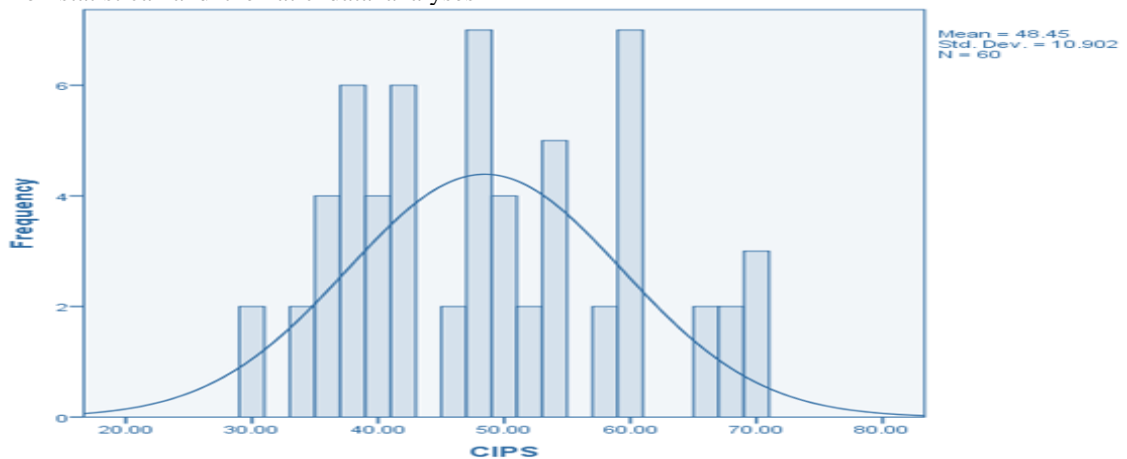
Faculty were given CIPS-A either through emails or social media channels. Additionally, basic demographic information was obtained, including age, major, years of experience, and marital status. After completion of the survey. The researcher chose the highest score of the faculty members who completed the CIPS in order to apply the TAT on the case that had the highest score in order to apply an interview with her if she accepted. The current study combined methods that yield quantitative QUAN and qualitative QUAL data research method which will provide the mixed methodology MM [47], because it represents the ideal approach since it involves the integration of statistical and thematic data analyses

and affords deep understanding of the family interactions that might contribute to the appearance of IP thoughts and feelings later during adulthood.

**VIII. RESULTS**

**A. Regarding the first question**

This study aimed to find out the prevalence of IP among female faculty in Medina. The Faculty scored a range of the CIPS- Arabic version between 30 – 69, the mean was 48.45, and standard deviation were 10.90. The mean indicates that the respondents have moderate IP experience, although there are 16 cases scored less than 40, that is 26.66% of the sample, which indicates few IP characteristics. The results also reveal that 14 cases scored between 61 and 80, that is 23.33% of the sample of this study, which indicates that they have frequently IP feelings.



**Chart (2)**

**The prevalence of IP among the sample of this study (n=60)**

The previous figure (2) shows moderate prevalence of IP among the sample of this study

That leaves us with 30 cases scored between 40 and 60 which indicates they have

moderate IP experience. The higher the score, the more frequently and seriously the IP interferes in a person's life [10]. In general, the results of applying CIPS-A indicates a moderate prevalence of IP thoughts and feelings for female faculty in Medina.

**B. Regarding the second question**

This study was set to family interactions and parents' influence during female academic staff's childhood as perceived by the teaching body themselves. To that end, the paper investigates parenting styles, conflicts, familial and siblings' dynamics with the subjects as possible variables, which may be predictive of IP. Following the collection of all responses on the IP scale, the faculty member with the highest CIPS-A score (69) volunteered to write stories of the TAT. She is a faculty member with a pseudo name (Sarah), with an experience from 1 to 5 years, and her major is

business administration. Her father died 10 years ago, and she is the eldest daughter of her parents. She was a very good student with outstanding performance in school. She reported that she always over-exerting herself in studies to be the absolute best in everything, however when she saw someone else getting better scores or grades, she would feel frustrated. Needless to say, she did not have even a single close friend. She is married and has two children. She said to the researcher that "achievement is comforting during life crises and that it is more important than social relations with people". On many occasions, her passed away father had expressed mild displeasure on his daughter coming second in a class report and had strong comments that he couldn't accept failure or anything below his expectations.

The following TAT stories were elected by her:

**Story 1:** A boy looking at the violin. "This boy is looking to the violin and remember his died



father. This violin is a gift from his father in his birthday. It has been a long time since he played on this violin. At times, it is difficult for him to believe how lonely he is, and his mother is sad since his death. Now no one is protecting him anymore, his mother wants to be safe from some relatives around her. The boy loved knowledge, so he never quitted reading books, and will always fall asleep while reading.

**Interpretation:** Sarah has a sense of sadness, loss, frustration since the death of her father as this is clear in the tone of her story. She also hindered loneliness, insecurity, along with a desire for achievement and accomplishment. She has strong need to reunion with her loved ones, has disappointment to family, showing some fear of success while obtaining goals and ended the story by refusal of surrender. It is clear that her relationship with her passed away father conducted her recent success because he is the major and sturdy personality which indicates paternal care.

**Story 2:** A woman holding books in a country scene watching a man working in a field in the background. "A father farmer is planting his farmland that he had worked so hard for. His wife standing in front of him and looking at the far horizon. Their daughter has arrived from school to join them in hard work. She thinks that her responsibility to help her parents in order to grow their corps and gain their trust. Although her teacher at school that she loves a lot thinks she is not good enough and she could not please her teacher which made her cry that day. But she could not tell her parents what happened".

**Interpretation:** The father is the central character in this story, and the source of security. The story implicit conflict between family obligation, duty and ambition. There is a hidden need to please her parents in their plans for the future. There is a hindered feeling of fear of success unexpressed in real life shown in the un ability to please her teacher at school underlying the desire to please others to gain security. Crying and outcome of the story implicit incomplete success in attaining goals or that goals attained in expense of happiness.

**Story 5:** A woman looking into a room from the door. "A mother is calling her daughter in the room in order to eat food with them. The daughter is studying hard to get high marks in the exam, and she does not want to join them for lunch, but she could not refuse her mother orders. Longing for appreciation, she went to join them, and her father praised her after she told him she received good marks from her exam. Her room is her small world after all".

**Interpretation:** This card gives out information about the surrounding attitudes of the

subject. For Sarah, she expressed a presence of her mother around her, which indicates maternal care. moreover, desire for success and for the first time it appears that there is an over dominant parent. We notice some sense of conflict between her needs and her parents' pressure but without aggression. There are feelings of loneliness and slight frustration appears ones again in this card. There is also a need for appraisal from her father which contributes to her happiness.

**Story 7GF:** A young girl is sitting on a couch with a doll in her hands, and an older woman sitting behind her is reading to her from a book. "A girl carrying her newly born sister, her mother is looking at her while the eldest sister is looking at the door or the person who is coming through the door".

**Interpretation:** Short story indicates fear of expression or frustration because of maternal relation, which derives Sarah to end it quickly. She recognized the doll in this card as her sister, which may indicate a sibling jealousy or interference in her relationship with her mother especially from a younger sister. The atmosphere of the story includes pressure from her mother, worry, disappointment towards her as a child". Note: Sarah was worried while writing this story which may explicit maternal pressure or repeated failure to get appraisal.

**Story 9GF:** A woman standing behind a tree looking at another woman, who seems to be running on a beach. "A girl is running from a problem happened to her and she is beside a beach. Another girl is holding a book and watching and monitoring her and seems to hate her or want her to drown in the sea. She may fall on the ground several times and her feet hitted the rocks on the ground, but she completed her way until she met someone who helped her at the end".

**Interpretation:** This card brought out feelings of insecurity, conflict, sense of guilt and longing for departure. The story tone refers to disturbed peer relation or sibling rivalry and jealousy. A book here reflects the importance of reading to her and longing for success. Paranoiac feelings and thoughts may be depicted here with feelings of insecurity and difficulties in her life. The outcome of the story shows desire for success and receiving support outside family interactions which may indicate marital support.

**Story 12F:** A young woman at the front and an older woman holding her chin at the background. Observation: " A woman is thinking about her future. She is alone and imagining how her face will look like in the future. She thinks a lot, but she is a successful woman and she can buy a house for her and her children. The ending is unknown because only God knows the coming.

**Interpretation:** It is not uncommon for the older woman to have negative qualities ascribed to her, and often be described as a stepmother or mother in law. This may in fact, be a disguise for feelings towards the mother [2]. Sarah, however, recognized the old woman as the future of the same main character in the card, and not someone else. This may imply disappointment with her mother and unfulfilled needs in the pressured maternal relationship. Once again, feelings of loneliness aroused, fear, desire for success, some frustration from the past and hope in her own children. Religious thoughts attend which implicit her way of adjustment and resilience.

**Story 13B:** A boy sitting in the doorway of a log cabin. "A young poor boy waiting for his absent father. He has no money to go to school, and his friends are at school now. He needs to buy a pair of shoes to be able to play or run fast. He spent the night crying and wetted his pillow with tears. He needs just a little word to praise or encourage him, but he never hears it".

**Interpretation:** This card brought out once again feelings of loneliness, fear, frustration from unfulfilled maternal care, and absence of her father, who appears to be a source of security and encouragement. Sarah mentioned inability to attend school due to poverty of her parents, and this may be an indication of memories from her childhood connected to unfulfilled desires or goals which related to her family pressure. The desire to "play" can implicit a need to enjoy self and find recreation. She revealed thoughts of need for success and make a progress in her life. Feelings of sadness, failure of expression and disappointment are also available here especially at the end of the story.

**Story 13G:** There is a flight of stairs and a girl climbing on it. "A home maid is going up the stairs to fulfil her job. She is supporting her family and raising two children, that's why she needs to work day and night. Maybe she is crying while she has to climb all the long way up the stairs, but she never quit her job for the sake of her kids".

**Interpretation:** This card reveals loneliness, physical exhaustion, worry for the future, and need for emotional and financial security. We notice also the need for achievement for Sarah especially for the sake of her own family which reflects compensation of her relationship with her parents. The desire to do one's duty is interpreted as the desire to do what is morally correct, what one has been taught to do, to live up with one's ideal and to do the "right thing". This is related to strong parental dominance.

### C. Particular Findings of stories' Interpretations

1)The most absent yet influential character in her stories was the father whose death caused an insecurity and encouragement for her. Since IP

thoughts are related to insecure and anxious attachment with care givers especially the parents, thus Sarah developed IP thoughts throughout her life phases as result to lack of paternal support.

2) Stories indicate lack of maternal care and frustration from an unfulfilling relation with the mother. Lack of true reassurance for her personality rather than her successes might have led to IP thoughts. There is also an indication of maternal pressure and at the same time, lack of paternal support.

3)Family dynamics include: Absence of paternal support, lack of communication, Pressure based maternal relation, jealousy toward a younger female sibling, conflict between her needs and her parents' pressure, rules and obligations which caused behaviours of over performance accompanied with worry to please others, anxious attachment with parents may lead to fear of failure and evaluation, attempts to receive positive attention from others to compensation for a negative view of self and fear of rejection or abandonment.

These familial dynamics might have triggered the appearance of thoughts of IP later on during her adulthood.

## IX. DISCUSSION&CONCLUSION

The present study predicted the prevalence of IP thoughts among female faculty in Medina. In general, the results of applying CIPS-A indicates a moderate prevalence of IP feelings for female faculty in Medina. This result is consistent with the previous studies conducted their study on sample of faculty [43],[30],[29]. The results provide preliminary evidence that academic faculty do experience imposter thoughts, although female faculty in Medina have achieved success and reached high positions in knowledge, yet they battle inner feelings of fraudulence silently. Imposter feelings and thoughts would result in a delay in advancement in the faculty rank, promotion, or other career advancement. Furthermore, prolonged imposter experiences may stunt faculty growing in their capability and efficacy towards their professional identity as researchers, mentors, and teachers [30] thus, more researches should address this study area. Results of this study shows moderate prevalence of IP among faculty in Medina, and 14 cases i.e. 23.33% of the sample, who have frequently IP thoughts and feelings, adds to the importance and need to apply further researches in this field.

For the qualitative part of the current study, results show that family interactions and parent's influence during childhood from the faculty point of view, including: (parenting styles, conflicts, familial and siblings' dynamics with the subject) are predictive of

IP. The results of this study suggest that women's inability to internalize positive achievements may stem from negative early relational experiences and familial dynamics. This finding echoes that of a study conducted by [36] which found that maternal overprotection was found to be positively correlated with impostor scores. Additionally, [7] found that impostors are more likely to come from families that are low on cohesion, have a limited channel of expression, and have a lot of conflict and rules. Furthermore, [13] suggested that individuals from family environments heavily emphasizing achievement may be especially likely to experience IP. This finding is consistent with previous research and theory suggesting that family interactions and parent's influence during childhood including: (parenting styles, conflicts, familial and siblings' dynamics with the subject) would be predictive of IP [4],[45],[23], [25], [52],[51], [36]. The findings of this study suggest that early relationship with primary caregivers is associated with IP thoughts and feelings in female faculty. Family tendency to over judge their daughter for her accomplishment rather than her effort would lead her to excessively attempt to receive positive attention from others to compensate for a negative view of herself and fear of rejection or abandonment. Additionally, high anxious attachment with parents may lead to fear of failure and evaluation (whether positive or negative) (Gibson-Beverly & Schwartz, 2008). An assistant professor reported:

I think these feelings are more prevalent in people who have had family like mine. I am the first in my family to go to university, and then to achieve doctorate or to get a masters. I think for sure that women struggle more with impostor thoughts. We live in a society where men are privileged in our society, and women have a lot to prove to others, and not enough all the time.

## X. RECOMMENDATIONS

**A.** Conduct further studies relevant to IP and expand research to include broader categories and age groups of successful women working as top executives, university professors and other areas of expertise. Conducting studies to identify the most appropriate techniques of social and psychological treatment suitable for those who have frequent IP.

**B.** Investigate social and family factors which are likely to be potential causes for IP, so as to identify, predict their existence and ultimately control them.

**C.** Explore differences and similarities of IP amongst men compared to women locally, nationally and internationally. This should heighten our understanding of IP's gender and societal variables, so as to enrich academic outcome, and ultimately control such a Phenomenon.

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