COMMENTARY

Impostor Phenomenon in Pharmacy Students as It Relates to Professional Identity Formation

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This commentary describes the relationship between impostor phenomenon and professional identity formation, and draws attention to validation theory in supporting student development. Student-level challenges are highlighted and roles faculty members could play in actively encouraging professional identity formation and helping overcome impostor feelings are discussed.

Keywords: impostor phenomenon, impostor syndrome, professional identity formation

Impostor phenomenon was first described by Imes and Clance in 1978. The phenomenon is characterized by feeling self-doubt about one’s abilities and not deserving of their achievements. Several studies in health science students, including pharmacy students, describe relatively high prevalence of impostor phenomenon. A recent study found that 58% of pharmacy students have either frequent or intense impostor feelings (Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (CIPS) score greater than 61). The phenomenon is also common in other professional students, for example, law students. While impostor phenomenon is frequently portrayed as a problem or presented as a “diagnosis” (thus frequently referred to as “syndrome,” implying that the person experiencing it is a “patient” battling this condition), impostor phenomenon is not an official diagnosis listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-5.

At times, this intellectual insecurity may be accompanied by anxiety or depression. More recently, broader discussions consider whether this phenomenon is a problem of an individual, or a misalignment between stereotypical expectations of what “good” or “appropriate” performance should be, marginalizing those who do not fit into the pre-existing mold. For instance, leadership qualities that are expected of a high-level executive could parallel those of masculinity (aggressiveness, decisiveness, assertiveness). Women, who may have a different leadership style and approach, can feel out of place in a high-profile position due to conscious and unconscious expectations of what good leadership skills should be. Addressing impostor feelings with individuals may address some of their ambivalences, but this is not the core of the problem. This example illustrates that it is essential to create professional environments that support diverse leadership models where a variety of individual identities (e.g. ethnic, gender) are embraced similarly to the typically accepted model, where masculine traits are most valued.

Let’s further explore factors that may contribute to environments where impostor feelings could flourish. In addition to the example from the business literature noted above, researchers in psychology also propose departing from framing this phenomenon as internal insecurities of an individual person and considering how external constructs, such as social or professional environments and expectations contribute to impostor feelings in some individuals. Societal, institutional, and interpersonal expectations are rarely discussed, but could be essential contributors to feeling of discomfort, ambiguity, and anxiety when attempting to do or learn something new. In fact, professional socialization early in students’ academic career can lead to stress and feeling of overwork which, while expected during professional training, can contribute to impostor feelings. Which leads to this question: is feeling ambivalent or unsure of your abilities to some extent a normal part of professional identity formation (PIF)?

Supporting and guiding students on forming their professional identity has recently come into focus within the academy. American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy (AACP) Student Affairs Standing Committee encourages inclusion of professional identity curriculum into doctor of pharmacy programs. According to the 2021 report, professional identity “involves internalizing and demonstrating the behavioral norms, standards, and values of professional community, such that one comes to “think, act and feel” like a member of that community.” Medical field has been engaged in discussions about the importance of PIF for over a decade, with recent scoping review identifying...
Several theories explain how professional identity may be formed. Central to the identity formation is socialization, which takes into account pre-existing person’s identity (personal characteristics and experiences preceding admission into doctor of pharmacy program, for example, class, education, or sexual orientation) and factors that shape professional identity during the doctoral program (role models and mentors, clinical and non-clinical experiences, self-assessment, formal teaching and assessment, learning environments, health care system influence/“real-life” experiences, and symbols and rituals, among others). Many of these factors are active curricular and co-curricular interventions (e.g. formal teaching and assessment), while others are external factors (e.g. healthcare systems, which may have different pressures and cultures from that of an academic institution). Professional curricula teach and assess self-awareness, which is integral in the process of PIF. Students need to adequately reflect on their knowledge, skills and abilities and self-assess their progress towards becoming a pharmacist. Without growing one’s competence in managing medical therapy, PIF will be severely compromised. But what about other factors, factors that the curriculum planning and implementation have much lesser influence on? What about how one starts “feeling” like a pharmacist?

Validation theory is a theoretical framework that describes academic and interpersonal validation as important factors in helping students succeed in college. Major and career self-efficacy (MCSE) is a common parameter evaluated in student persistence studies. MCSE is student’s trust in their ability to be successful in a specific study area or career trajectory. Multiple studies in enrollment management literature focus on evaluating programs or interventions (for example, implementing career workshops), but few focus on how these interventions are delivered to the students and who would be the most impactful influence. Faculty members have an immense role in helping students form professional identity by providing validation; this entails understanding where the students are in each stage of their academic journey, connecting with them at their developmental level, and helping them become pharmacists. It is important to recognize that novice learners can be easily intimidated by new challenges or tasks for which they had little or no preparation; this indicates that practical knowledge and skills are needed before mastery is achieved. While much is discussed in the literature about various strategies that encourage PIF (e.g. symbolic socialization, formal professionalism instruction, role modeling), systematic or universal recommendations on best practices are lacking.

The intangible but likely very influential aspect in helping the students build their professional identity while overcoming feelings of inadequacy is how faculty members interact with the students in each of their early and later courses. When pharmacy students first get admitted to the professional program, while many of them held jobs in a community setting, several likely interact with advanced-trained pharmacists for the very first time. These interactions help shape students’ first feeling about the profession of pharmacy (excited, intimidated, overwhelmed, curious, intrigued). Interactions with faculty members throughout their academic journey continues to help grow (or confuse) students’ sense of belonging to the profession and feeling like a competent pharmacist. Students may confuse being inexperienced (low levels of familiarity or knowledge) with being unqualified (low levels of ability). Discussing impostor phenomenon, recognizing its impact and prevalence, can assist students in overcoming these impostor feelings.

Law literature suggests that acknowledging existence of impostor phenomenon and providing an encouraging and supportive environment inside the classroom can create a climate where students feel they belong and deserve to be in the professional program which supports PIF. One article suggested that acknowledging students for strong performance by words of encouragement (beyond grades) or a personal e-mail can communicate to them that they are on the right trajectory to becoming a competent professional. The encouragement should address not only quality of the assignment of performance in class, but also how this relates to students’ future development into a professional colleague.

Mentoring relationships between faculty and students are also invaluable. For example, mentors can help recognize impostor feelings in their students and help refocus their thought process from attributing success in a course or on an assignment to pure luck and shifting to attributing good performance to competence, efficiency, and team-building skills. Mentors can shift students’ beliefs by setting expectations that learning is not a linear upward trajectory, and setbacks are normal during training. These setbacks are not proof of student’s “not belonging” in the profession, they are normal part of learning. These examples support validation theory of helping build MCSE and PIF.

What is the action that pharmacy academic community can take to help students overcome impostor feelings, make them feel welcome, prepared, and excited about joining the profession and leading needed changes? An essential component of our professional identity should include being empathetic and welcoming towards our prospective colleagues that are the future of pharmacy. Creating a safe and supportive environment while maintaining high academic standards, appropriately structured to encourage budding confidence, is of paramount importance. Motivating students to learn, encouraging them to display intellectual curiosity, recognizing students’ assets (what they know) as opposed to focusing on deficits, developing them in academically rigorous environment that is respectful and empathetic, without coddling or condescension can support students who may have impostor feelings. Meanwhile, in learning environments where students are encouraged to compare their performance with their peers, feedback from a faculty member diminishes
the effort and focuses only on correctness, and students are afraid to speak up in fear of being exposed can make impostor feelings more pervasive. This article does not aim to diminish the influence of impostor feelings in accomplished professionals who still feel they are inadequate or will be discovered as a fraud; rather, it intends to raise awareness of how we can acknowledge its existence, clarify its roots, and help address it in early stages when students are just starting their professional journeys. Every faculty member has a unique opportunity to help build up confidence and form the professional identity we desire in our graduates, from first professional year to the last. It is a privilege to be involved in someone’s becoming a pharmacist. We should strive to take every chance to do so.

REFERENCES