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Rainbow Impostors

Impostor Syndrome in the LGBTQ+ Community

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Rainbow Impostors

Impostor Syndrome in the LGBTQ+ Community

Most people do not enjoy feeling like they are not enough or as if they are not a part of their community. As human beings we are social creatures and our communities play an essential role both in our development as we grow up and for our overall emotional well-being as we continue to live our lives. When people feel like they are an outcast or like they are not contributing to the progress of their community it can have a negative impact on their state of mind. This sense of self-doubt can cause individuals to realize their fear of being excluded from their community. When self-doubt creeps in, fear tags along.

Impostor syndrome is more than self-doubt. To have impostor syndrome is to feel as if you have deceived those around you into thinking that you are more intelligent and capable than you actually are (Kumar & Jagacinski 2006). People with impostor syndrome often doubt their own abilities and they struggle to take pride in their accomplishments. Even when other people praise them for their success they can feel as if they are not worthy of such praise. Impostor syndrome is the consistent negative voice telling someone that not only are they not good enough, they are also fooling everyone around them, and one day they will be found out as the underperforming fraud they view themselves to be.

Self-esteem has been shown to have a strong correlation with impostor syndrome and that people who deal with this are more likely to have mental health issues (Sonnak & Towell 2001, Thompson et. al. 2000). Living in a world where one experiences discrimination, such as homophobia and transphobia, can lead to having a lower self-esteem which can lead to impostor syndrome. This leads to my research question, are people who are a part of the LGBTQ+

community more likely to experience impostor syndrome than people who are not a part of the LGBTQ+ community.

People in the LGBTQ+ community still experience homophobia and transphobia and have been shown to be more likely to engage in risky behaviours (Sell & Krims 2021, Rafifi et al. 2019). This can be a detrimental problem when it comes to the health of these individuals. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Sell and Krims (2021) found that people in the LGBTQ+ community were all more likely to have risk factors for coronavirus than the rest of society.

Several studies have consistently shown that people who have been marginalized by society are more likely to experience impostor syndrome (Cokely et. al. 2017, Joshley & Mangette 2018). Since people in the LGBTQ+ community have historically been marginalized by society there is a reasonable chance that they are more likely to experience impostor syndrome. This adds additional pressure to the societal pressures that this community already faces, struggles such as figuring out their sexual and gender identities, coming out of the closet, fear of being outed before they come out of the closet, and being discriminated against because of their identities.

Feeling isolated by society can lead to problems in other aspects of life. There was a study where they used scales to measure shame and internalized homophobia. This study showed that the more gay men had internalized homophobia the more likely they were to have avoidant and anxious attachment styles (Brown & Trevethan 2010). They also found that the longer their participants waited to tell their families the more shame they had.

Discrimination can have detrimental affects to a person's well-being. A study was done where the participants who reported experiencing racial discrimination were more likely to experience depression, lower academic achievements, and lower self-esteem (Huynh, & Fuligni

2010). Their participants consisted of people who were Asian, Latinx, and white. While their study focused on racial discrimination the feelings of being isolated by members of society, regardless of the reason behind it, can still be detrimental to one's mental health. Also there are many people in the LGBTQ+ community who are people of color and therefore, also experience racially based discrimination which means that they are even more likely to experience these negative affects.

People are not only more likely to experience impostor syndrome if they are in a sexual, racial, or ethnic minority, but there is also a gender difference. A study found that women are more likely to be afraid of being an impostor than men are, which correlated with the fact that they were more likely to struggle with confidence and test anxiety (Kumar & Jagacinski 2006). They also found that women were more likely to experience a fixed mindset of their intelligence, meaning they were afraid to try new things due to their fear of failure. Confidence in one's own intelligence plays a key role in determining impostor syndrome. Another study found that individuals with impostor syndrome are more likely to not be confident in their abilities or achievements (Leary et al. 2000). This internal struggle causes people to undermine themselves in which they then fear that others will also doubt their abilities. While this study showed consistent results with Kumar & Jagacinski (2006) they also found that the more men were afraid of failure the more likely they were to experience impostor syndrome.

For the current study, there are at least two possibilities for the results. The first is that there may be no significant difference between people in the LGBTQ+ community and people who do not identify as a part of the community on impostor syndrome. This could mean that people who are a part of the LGBTQ+ community may not feel marginalized. If people who feel same-sex attraction feel like they are accepted it could be a sign that society has progressed

significantly in the past few years. A second possibility is that there is a significant difference between people in the LGBTQ+ community and people who do not identify as a part of the community on impostor syndrome. That will mean that we still have farther to go to help people in the LGBTQ+ community to feel welcomed by society. In the United States of America it has only been six years since 2015, when the Marriage Equality Act was passed in the Supreme Court.

Are people who are a part of the LGBTQ+ community more likely to experience impostor syndrome than people who are not in the LGBTQ+ community? To study this, students from a small state college in California were surveyed via a website called SONA. These students were all taking psychology classes and were offered either course credit or extra credit for their class. The survey consisted of questions from the *Impostor Phenomenon Scale* (Clance, 1985) and questions about their sexual and gender identities.

Method

Participants

Every participant affirmed that they were over 18 years old apart from one participant who said they were going to turn 18 years old between November 10th and 16th of 2021. All of the participants were students from a small state university and studying psychology. They were offered either course credit or extra credit for their participation. They were able to participate in the study by using the SONA database.

Materials

I measured Impostor Syndrome using the *Impostor Phenomenon Scale* (Clance, 1985). All of the questions about sexual and gender identities were from me, the researcher. To create questions I pondered how to best ask the participants about their sexual and gender identities and

then scaled the appropriate answers. Some of the questions asked were “Do you identify as a part of the LGBTQ+ community?” and “How do you identify your sexual identity?” The survey is self-reported and as this was the first time the questions about sexual and gender identities were used their validity is not known (See Appendix for all the items), but the *Impostor Phenomenon Scale* (Clance, 1985) has been used in multiple peer-reviewed studies.

Procedure

All of the questions were put into SONA which is a database that the psychology department of this small state college regularly uses. Every semester psychology professors offer class credit in order to motivate their students to fill out surveys. The students were voluntary participants who had the opportunity to receive either course credit or extra credit and they were able to participate in the study by using the SONA database. Students register on a website, go through a pre-screening process, and then select surveys that they would like to sign up for.

Results

The research question was are people who are a part of the LGBTQ+ community more likely to experience impostor syndrome? Several questions were compared using independent samples t tests to answer this hypothesis. The answers to the question “Do you identify as a part of the LGBTQ+ community?” were compared between people who answered “yes” and people who answered “no” to the statements to the Impostor Phenomenon Scale (Clance, 1985) with an independent samples t-test. There was no significant difference in Levene’s Test for Equality Variances, $t(47) = 4.02, p = .051$. When variance was assumed the significant difference was $p = .004$.

The answers to the question “What is your sexual identity?” were compared between people who answered “heterosexual” and people who answered as a variety of sexualities to the

Impostor Phenomenon Scale (Clance, 1985) with an independent samples t-test. There was a significant difference in Levene's Test for Equality Variances $t(47) = 4.57, p = .038$. When variances were not assumed the significant difference was $p = .017$.

Discussion

My hypothesis was that people who are a part of the LGBTQ+ community are more likely to experience impostor syndrome. I found a significant difference on the impostor syndrome questions when I compared the responses to the question "What is your sexual identity?" between the people who said they identified as heterosexual and the people who identified as other sexual identities. These results confirmed my hypothesis.

A significant difference was not found with the question "Do you identify as a part of the LGBTQ+ community?" when compared to my participant's mean results to the Impostor Phenomenon Scale (Clance, 1985). I was not able to reject the null hypothesis to this question because in Levene's Test for Equality Variances a significant difference is considered to be found if $p = .05$ or less and this question had the result of $p = .051$. It is worth noting that .051 is only slightly larger than .05 or even .049. I propose that if I repeat my research project with a larger sample size or if I were to survey more people I would have been able to reject the null hypothesis for this particular question.

The significant difference that I found led me to reflect on how people who already feel like they are not a part of society are more likely to struggle with impostor syndrome. Most people do not want to feel isolated from their community and individuals who have impostor syndrome feel as if they are deceiving those around them. This, coupled with the fears of homophobia and coming out of the closet, show that there is still more to go in letting people in the LGBTQ+ community into mainstream society.

When I found a significant difference it confirmed several studies that have shown that people who are a part of a marginalized community are more likely to experience impostor syndrome (Cokely et. al. 2017, Joshley. & Mangette 2018). While it is more likely to affect marginalized groups it can also add on stress to people to feel even more different than they already do (Major et al. 2007).

It is interesting to see that not everyone who identified as another sexuality other than “heterosexual” also identified as a part of the LGBTQ+ community. This could be due to inner conflict within the community or a lack of inclusivity that is felt by people who identify as a less accepted sexuality, such as bisexuality or asexuality.

There can also be a possible correlation between being in the closet and impostor syndrome as many of the feelings are the same. People in the closet oftentimes feel as if they are deceiving those around them and people with impostor syndrome also feel the same. Likewise both parties are often also afraid of being found out as either a part of the LGBTQ+ community or as an impostor.

My sample size was 50 and was limited to students from a small coastal university in California. A larger sample size with a wider range of ages, ethnicities, and backgrounds could be beneficial to future replications of this study. I would recommend using the Impostor Phenomenon Scale (Clance, 1985) and using SONA or a website like it which allows participants to answer honestly without feeling like they are being negatively judged for their answers.

In conclusion a significant difference was found with the question “What is your sexual identity?” when compared to the mean results of the Impostor Phenomenon Scale (Clance, 1985), but not with “Do you identify as a part of the LGBTQ+ community?” when compared to

the same scale. We have further to go as far as lifting the pressure of coming out and acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community. When we reach a point of acceptance it is likely that people who identify their sexuality as anything other than heterosexual will not feel so much like they are an impostor among us.

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Appendix

Gender and Sexuality Questions

Do you identify as a part of the LGBTQ+ community?

- Yes
- No

What are your gender pronouns? Click all that apply.

- She/Her/Hers
- He/Him/His
- They/Them/Theirs
- Zie/Zir/Zis
- Other

How do you identify your gender? Click all that apply.

- Cis Female
- Cis Male
- Transgender Female
- Transgender Male
- Non-binary
- Genderfluid
- Genderqueer
- Intersex
- Agender
- Other

How do you identify your sexuality? Click all that apply.

- Heterosexual
- Gay
- Lesbian
- Bisexual
- Pansexual
- Queer
- Asexual

- Demisexual
- Polysexual
- Demiromantic
- Aromantic
- Questioning
- Other