

UNDERSTANDING IMPOSTOR SYNDROME THROUGH A GOFFMANESQUE LENS

RAZUMIJEVANJE SINDROMA VARALICE KROZ
GOFFMANOVSKI PRISTUP

**Mia
Papa
Stubbs**

Sveučilište u Zagrebu
Filozofski fakultet
Ul. Ivana Lučića 3, 10 000 Zagreb
1. godina diplomskog studija
Sociologija, smjer Znanstveni
mpapastub@m.ffzg.hr

Sažetak

Svrha rada je primijeniti aspekte teorije Ervinga Goffmana kako bi se pokazalo kako se može razumjeti široko poznat psihološki fenomen „sindrom varalice“ iz sociološke perspektive. Goffmanovi ključni koncepti, poput: prednje pozornice, stražnje pozornice, upravljanja dojmom i performativnosti, služe kao korisni objašnjavajući alati u razumijevanju kako i zašto pojedinci mogu početi osjećati da su sva njihova postignuća samo gluma. Goffmanov pristup pomaže smjestiti fenomen sindroma varalice u sociološki okvir, umjesto u usko psihološku perspektivu. Prema Goffmanu, sve su društvene interakcije izvedbe, a upravljanje dojmom društvena je praksa koja ovisi o određenom društvenom kontekstu i prilagođava mu se. Općenito govoreći, društveni akteri ponašaju se i djeluju različito ovisno o normama koje vladaju u određenom kulturnom, profesionalnom ili interakcijskom okruženju. Također nastoje održati jasnu podjelu između prednje i stražnje pozornice, iako u tome nisu uvijek uspješni. Goffman pokazuje kako osjećaji srama ili neugode nastaju kada izvođači nisu uvjereni u vlastite postupke ili kada osjećaju da ih javnost percipira kao „neautentične“ ili kao osobe koje ne pripadaju određenom okruženju. Kombiniranjem Goffmanovih analiza s makropristupima mogu se razmotriti klasne, rodne, etničke i druge dimenzije sindroma varalice. Rad završava kritikama Goffmanovog pristupa te prijedlozima za daljnja istraživanja.

Ključne riječi:

performans, Goffman, prednja pozornica, stražnja pozornica, sindrom varalice

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to apply aspects of Erving Goffman's theory to demonstrate how the "impostor syndrome", a popular psychological phenomenon, can be understood in a more sociological way. Goffman's main concepts, such as front stage, back stage, impression management, and performativity, serve as useful explanatory tools for understanding how and why individuals may start to feel that their achievements are just an act. Goffman's approach helps place the phenomenon of impostor syndrome within a sociological frame rather than a narrow psychological one. According to Goffman, all social interactions are performances, and impression management is a social practice dependent on and adapted to a particular social context. In broad terms, social actors behave and act differently depending on the norms in a particular cultural, professional, or interactional setting. They also try to maintain a clear division between front stage and back stage, though not always successfully. Goffman shows how feelings of shame or embarrassment occur when performers are unconvinced by their own actions or feel the public views them as "inauthentic" or not belonging. Combining Goffman's analyses with more macro-approaches, the class, gender, ethnic, and other dimensions of impostor syndrome can be addressed. The paper ends with criticisms of Goffman's approach and suggestions for further research.

Key words:

performance, Goffman, front stage, back stage, impostor syndrome

1. Introduction

The work of Erving Goffman (1922-1982) seeks to combine a sociology of interactions with social psychology. Outside of the narrow field of social interactionism, his work has tended to be neglected in recent years (Ranchi, 2021), even though there are clear connections between his work and several turns within sociology, particularly turns towards the performative and affect. Although feminist scholar Judith Butler is often seen as highly innovative, many of her ideas on performance, identity, and subjectivity resemble those developed by Goffman or, at the very least, can be seen as operating within a similar broad tradition (Ylivouri, 2022). Here, I use one strand of Goffman's work on performance to try to understand "impostor syndrome" in its broader social context.

The main purpose of this paper is to analyse the construct of the impostor syndrome phenomenon through Goffman's performance theory. More specifically, I demonstrate the ways in which Goffman's main concepts, such as front stage, back stage and performativity may serve as useful explanatory tools in understanding how and why individuals may start to feel as if all of their achievements are just an act. Webster's dictionary defines impostor syndrome as "a psychological condition that is characterized by persistent doubt concerning one's abilities and accomplishments accompanied by the fear of being exposed as a fraud despite evidence of one's ongoing success" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). It is this highly individualistic and psychological frame that I critique in this paper. I begin with an overview of the key concepts in Goffman's theory of performance. I then review the existing psychological and sociological literature on impostor syndrome before looking at how understandings of it may change when linked with performance theory. Finally, I move on to examine, more specifically, the relevance of Goffman's concepts of front stage and back stage for understanding impostor syndrome. In conclusion, I summarise the argument, address some problems with Goffman's own work, and suggest avenues for future research and conceptualisation.

2. A brief overview of Goffman's performance theory.

The work of Erving Goffman deals with “microphenomena” in the social world and uses a dramaturgical analogy to describe performativity in social interactions. Scheff (2007) argues that Goffman's theory could be seen as an “impetus” for the social sciences, as it focuses on the worlds of interactions, emotions, and relationships. These are themes and topics that have often been marginalised or neglected in contemporary social science, which is largely focused on the macroworld of structures (Ranchi, 2021). Some of the most important concepts that Goffman has coined are front region (or front stage), back region (or back stage), and impression management.

Goffman's book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956) introduces the idea of impression management through performance in everyday life. The concept of impression management suggests that the goal of a particular performance is to assert an image desired by the spectators in a particular social setting. More specifically, “when an individual plays a part he [sic] implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them” (Goffman, 1956, p. 66). According to Goffman (1956), impression management is a social practice which is dependent on and adapted to a particular social context. In broad terms, social actors behave and act differently depending on the norms in a particular cultural, professional or interactional setting: “How we socially construct our ‘self’ is a reflective, co-creative process that relies not only on our own careful manipulations but also on the way others understand and interpret our image” (Zavattaro, 2013, p. 512). Therefore, he suggests that the performer's view of the audience's expectations and the broader social context in which an interaction takes place help frame how a performer acts. Many of Goffman's real-world empirical examples, however, go beyond the idea of a passive audience to suggest that broad expectations and

specific cues are provided by the public to, in his most famous examples, funeral directors and their staff waiters in restaurants.

In order to successfully manage their impressions, social actors must constantly interpret their expectations as well as the direct and indirect feedback from the audiences whose impressions they are trying to manage. The setting in which a performance is actively taking place is referred to as the “front region” (Goffman, 1956). The front region can be thought of as a stage in which an act takes place. This includes the clothes worn by the social actor who is performing, their facial expressions, ways of speaking, nonverbal communication, etc. In contrast to the front region, Goffman (1956) puts forward the idea of a “back region”: “a back region or back stage may be defined as a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course” (p. 69). It is within the backstage area that the preparation for the performance takes place: “Here costumes and other parts of personal front may be adjusted and scrutinised for flaws” (Goffman, 1956, p. 70). At the same time, in the backstage, performers can be more like their “true” selves, as illustrated in the example of those involved in a funeral laughing and sharing jokes with each other before solemnly presenting as serious when front stage.

3. Impostor syndrome: exclusively a psychological phenomenon?

The term “impostor syndrome” refers to a psychological phenomenon or experience which is characterised by feelings that one’s achievements are the result of luck or oversight rather than merit or competence (Feenstra et al., 2020). Individuals experiencing this phenomenon fear that their perceived incompetence will be exposed, which in turn may result in a lack of success: “Despite

their objective success, these individuals express difficulty internalising their achievements and accomplishments and worry that they may be uncovered as frauds” (Feenstra et al., 2020, p. 1). Another key characteristic associated with impostor syndrome is a persistent feeling that one is performing and attempting to convey an image to others that is incompatible with “reality”.

It is important to note that this phenomenon is typically discussed in psychological research and popular discourse rather than within a sociological frame. Feenstra et al. (2020) suggest that within clinical psychology, the focus in studying the impostor phenomenon is mostly on individual personality traits, while the broader social context, which could be a contributing factor in the development of these feelings, is largely overlooked. Additionally, calling it a “syndrome” connotes a degree of pathologisation which could result in shifting responsibility entirely onto the individual: “Depicting the phenomenon as a ‘syndrome’ gives the impression that the individuals who experience it are ‘patients’” (Bravata et al., 2019, as cited in Feenstra et al., 2020, p. 2), implying they require clinical help. Calling it a “syndrome” may also imply that it is an illness which must be cured, rather than a possible social phenomenon whose structural causes should be addressed: “Because of this individualistic, person-based approach to the impostor phenomenon, many of the proposed solutions and strategies for addressing impostor feelings nowadays focus on trying to ‘fix’ the individual” (Feenstra et al., 2020, p. 2). This recalls Becker’s theory of labelling (Becker, 1963) used by Goffman in his theory of stigma (Goffman, 1963), which suggests that, once applied, labels become straitjackets that are difficult to escape.

Discussions about the broader structural factors which may contribute to this particular phenomenon often remain overlooked. Moreover, research on impostor syndrome remains to be primarily situated in the psychological field, which could result in ignoring macro- and micro-processes that create the contexts in which this phenomenon may emerge and persist. Existing empirical research on the impostor syndrome is, for the most part, concerned with how it affects individuals and their potential for career success. For instance, Neureiter and Traut-Mattausch (2016) study the effect of

impostor syndrome on career development. Meanwhile, Feenstra et al., (2020) propose a social-psychological approach to impostor syndrome that takes social or 'contextual' factors into consideration when discussing the impostor phenomenon. Additionally, Norri and Vanttaja (2022) and Phelan (2024) use a Bourdiesian theoretical framework in order to quantitatively assess the link between different forms of capital and impostor feelings.

It is worth mentioning the social distribution of the prevalence of impostor syndrome and some of the social, economic and demographic elements that are commonly associated with it. Firstly, an overview of social and psychological research, particularly in the last decade, shows that women experience these feelings to a larger degree than men (Feenstra et al., 2020). Secondly, negative stereotyping is also found to be connected to impostor feelings: "In response to such negative portrayals of their group, ethnic minority students are likely to worry that their admission to, for instance, a prestigious university is the outcome of luck, instead of something they actually deserve" (Feenstra et al., 2020, p. 3). Finally, alongside negative stereotyping, previous discrimination is also linked to causing impostor syndrome: "Overall, this suggests that, at the societal level, the group that someone belongs to, and the portrayal of those groups in society, play an important role in triggering individuals' impostor feelings" (Feenstra et al, 2020, p. 3). In a way, then, even social-psychological research acknowledges the significance of gender, race, and class in terms of who is more likely to experience impostor syndrome.

4. Sociological approaches to impostor syndrome: bourdieusian perspectives

So far, this paper has explained what impostor syndrome is and some of the problems with viewing it strictly through a psychological lens. In addition, I have briefly explained some of the core features of Goffman's performance theory. As previously mentioned, impostor syndrome is mostly discussed within the psychological field; however, there are studies that connect this phenomenon with a broader sociological approach. More specifically, some researchers interpret impostor syndrome through concepts put forward by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.

A quantitative study conducted by Norri and Vanttaja (2022) focuses on the prevalence of the impostor phenomenon amongst PhD students in Finland. The paper presents the idea that impostor feelings emerge as a result of the discrepancy between what Bourdieu has conceptualised as “field” and “habitus”. Habitus is described as a set of values, taste preferences, behaviours, and beliefs which are acquired and internalized as a result of primary socialization: “By habitus, Bourdieu meant a system of relatively permanent beliefs and tendencies that integrate the experiences of life history and influence an individual's actions and choices in different fields and situations of social life” (Norri and Vanttaja, 2022, p. 679). Field is defined as “a structured space of positions in which the positions and their interrelations are determined by the distribution of different kinds of capital” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 72). This means that impostor syndrome may derive from an individual occupying a position or role in a field for which their habitus has not prepared them; for example, a person of working-class origin working in academia.

The main findings of the multiple linear regression analysis of questionnaire answers showed that the most significant predictors of

impostor feelings amongst Finnish PhD students were a low level of parental encouragement and a low level of planning when applying for doctoral studies (Norri and Vanttaja, 2022). Interestingly, the results also showed that home resources and gender were not significant predictors of impostor syndrome.

Similarly, a quantitative study by Phelan (2024) also explored the same trend but reached a different conclusion. She argues that “higher-class habitus is more congruent with the norms and values of the higher education setting” (Phelan, 2024, p. 3). However, contrary to the study conducted on Finnish students, this study concluded that there is a significant association between low parental income and impostor feelings. Additionally, the regression analysis showed that impostor syndrome was linked with mental health problems and persistence in academic studies. The sample of this study consisted of students who are currently enrolled or used to be enrolled in a four-year university programme in the United States.

To conclude, these studies show how the impostor phenomenon could be linked with broader structural phenomena and explained using existing sociological theories. I argue that a Goffmanian approach could complement explanations based on the theories of Bourdieu.

5. Impostor syndrome as hyperawareness of one’s own performativity

The previous subsections of this paper have introduced some of the main ideas of Goffman’s theoretical framework and defined the impostor phenomenon. The following questions remain: why connect the impostor phenomenon with performance theory, and how can this connection best be made? I argue that interpreting impostor syndrome through Goffman’s work could serve as a way of combining a strictly psychological approach with an approach

that takes wider social factors into consideration to a greater extent. Moreover, this association of impostor syndrome with performance theory may serve as a “linking device” to situate a highly individual phenomenon in a broader structural context.

Scheff (2007) states that Goffman’s work is largely concerned with analysing the social causes and impacts of feelings such as shame and embarrassment. Shame is defined as “the large family of emotions which includes many cognates and variants, most notably embarrassment, guilt, humiliation, and related feelings which serve as a threat to the social bond” (Scheff, 2007, p. 69). These feelings are still often considered to be important when discussing the main characteristics of the impostor phenomenon; however, they are mostly analysed as individual psychological processes rather than social ones. Additionally, it could be argued that awareness of one’s impostor syndrome could in itself be seen as a source of shame and embarrassment. Therefore, I would like to suggest that impostor syndrome could, to some degree, be explained as the result of social actors being hyperaware of their own performativity in social situations and micro-interactions.

In his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956), Goffman has a chapter entitled “Performances” where he argues that a critical part of making a performance believable in certain contexts is how much the social actor is convinced by his or her own act: “At one extreme, we find that the performer can be fully taken in by his own act; he can be sincerely convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality” (Goffman, 1956, p. 10). When combined with the concept of the impostor phenomenon, this argument suggests that these impostor-like feelings result, in part, from the subject doubting the legitimacy of their own act or actions. Furthermore, this may be associated with the subject’s fear that their so-called “act” will be exposed as inauthentic and disingenuous by the audience at some point. Goffman (1956), however, stresses that there are situations in which social actors, while performing a particular role, are not at all convinced by their own performance and put on a show merely for the spectators. The audience holds certain expectations directly related to the social norms, which are dictated by the particular social setting that the

performance takes place in. It is possible that social situations in which the performer perceives their own act as lacking believability may trigger the development and persistence of impostor-like feelings.

In the performance chapter, Goffman (1956) introduces a distinction which could further strengthen the argument that feelings connected with impostor syndrome are perhaps associated with social actors who understand the fragile nature of their performance in everyday situations. He defines “cynical” performers who are not convinced by their own act precisely because they overidentify with the role, and contrasts them with “genuine” performers who believe in the authenticity of their own performance. In other words, “when an individual has no belief in his own act and no ultimate concern with the beliefs of his audience, we may call him cynical, reserving the term sincere for individuals who believe in the impression fostered by their own performance” (Goffman, 1956, p. 10). It could be argued that those experiencing impostor syndrome may be classified as “cynical” performers, and it is exactly this type of cynicism that causes individuals to become disconnected from their performing selves and what they perceive to be their “true” selves. Moreover, Goffman (1956) stresses that these cynical performances are sometimes caused by the social actors’ belief that they are “putting on a show” for the benefit of the audience. Impostor syndrome sufferers may be strongly aware of how much their behaviour is tailored to a particular social situation that they start to feel as if all their achievements are merely a product of adequately adapting their behaviour to a particular social context. This, in turn, leaves them unable to attribute their achievements to working hard or being competent but rather to being successful at performing and maintaining a pretence.

How can all the following arguments possibly be connected to broader structural phenomena such as class, race, gender, sexuality, disability, and more? Firstly, as I mentioned earlier, Feenstra et al. (2020) stress that women are more likely to experience these types of feelings, especially when they are in “male-dominated” environments. Additionally, “minorities are often stereotyped as being unintelligent or lazy” (Reyna, 2000, 2008, as cited in Feenstra

et al., 2020, p. 3), so when negatively stereotyped, they may feel a greater need to prove themselves through performance in order to “break” the stereotypes associated with them in the social context in which they are performing.

6. Fear of the backstage becoming the front stage

One of Goffman’s most important notions is the idea that every performance consists of a “front stage” and a “back stage”. I argue that feeling like an impostor can partially be caused by the fear that the spectators of a performance will witness elements of what is typically conceived as the “back stage” in the area where the performance is taking place, i.e. “the front stage”. This could be referred to as fearing cracks in social performances, and awareness of the cracks that occasionally occur in performances may cause shame and embarrassment, which the performer attempts to avoid in order to successfully “stage” a character.

Goffman states how “we often find that control of the backstage plays a significant role in the process of ‘work control’ whereby individuals attempt to buffer themselves from the deterministic demands that surround them” (Goffman, 1956, p. 70). Indeed, many of Goffman’s examples involve roles that are stressful in their public-facing nature, in which impression management becomes all important, such as those working in funeral companies. In other words, the backstage area serves the purpose where behaviours, personality traits, and actions which are incompatible with the social norms of the front stage no longer have to be hidden. It is worth mentioning that certain professional settings have stricter distinctions between the back stage and front stage areas: “Service personnel so commonly take for granted the right to keep the audience away from the back region that attention is drawn more to cases where this common strategy cannot be applied than to cases where it can” (Goffman, 1956, p. 71). This example shows how

blurred the lines are between the areas the audience has access to and those that remain concealed. It could be suggested that individuals with impostor syndrome have a sense of how blurred these lines are, and this sense causes them anxiety about how their act may be exposed.

Distinctions between front stage and back stage can be observed in various social structural phenomena. They are present regardless of class position, gender, professional occupation, and ethnic background. However, they manifest themselves differently in accordance to these variables and the differences in these areas can, in some situations, connote a difference between class positions: "It is, in fact, the presence of these staging devices that distinguishes middle-class living from lower-class living" (Goffman, 1956, p. 75). Goffman also provides examples of how these staging devices are different amongst members of different classes. It is entirely possible that members who have experienced upward class mobility have to go through a process of adjusting to a different organisation of staging devices and therefore experience difficulties in adapting. Once they have adapted on a performative level, they still have a more difficult time performing than those born into that particular class position. This is what could also lead to them feeling as if their achievements remain on a superficial performative level. Moreover, they might have a sense that they are acting and pretending more than the individuals that were born into their current class position.

7. Conclusions

To summarize, this paper attempts to demonstrate how can the commonly known psychological phenomenon of "impostor syndrome" be interpreted through the sociological theory put forward by Erving Goffman. The key argument is that individuals who experience this phenomenon may be hyperaware of the performative nature of social interactions and therefore, end up overly mindful of the fact that their back-stage self contrasts with their front-stage self. Additionally, it could serve as an explanation of the fears and stresses that these individuals experience by being aware of the

blurred lines between front stage and back stage. This could provide room for the development of a fear that cracks in one's performance will soon be visible in the front stage.

Goffman's work can be situated within the revival of interactionist studies in the 1960s United States. Many authors have applied Goffman's insights to the labelling of mental illness and the problems of reducing complex social interactions to the deficit, or pathology, of an individual. The diagnosis of "impostor syndrome" is similar in that it can abstract the individual and her or his behaviours from the broader social context and the structures in which individuals are embedded. In some ways, Goffman's emphasis on performance is both the greatest strength and the greatest weakness of his analysis. By emphasizing the improvisational nature of social encounters, he is in danger of neglecting the "baggage" that groups who are discriminated against bring to these encounters, and the expectations of their respective publics. Combining Goffman's insights with the more structural understandings of Pierre Bourdieu in terms of the different social and cultural capitals inevitably brought to encounters would seem to offer a way of linking the micro- and the macro-processes which are needed to understand impostor syndrome. For example, a student from a working-class or minority background is likely not only going to "not believe in their own performance", as Goffman suggests, but also lack the cultural capital to be seen as a competent performer, as Bourdieu would argue. From a contemporary perspective, Goffman's rigid distinction between "cynical" and "genuine" or "authentic" performances also seems problematic. Of course, Bourdieu is not the only sociologist whose concepts could be placed in a fruitful dialogue with Goffman's; others that immediately come to mind include Zygmunt Bauman's concept of "liquid modernity" (Bauman, 2000) and Anthony Giddens' concept of "ontological insecurity" (Giddens, 1991).

For future research and exploration of the topic of impostor syndrome, I suggest interpreting the impostor phenomenon with a combination of Goffman's performance theory and a more macro approach in order to better understand how structural factors contribute to the cause and persistence of feeling like one's achieve-

ments are entirely caused by pretending to belong in social spaces and professional settings that one does not “deserve” to be in. For sociology, “deservingness” is always structural and relational. Furthermore, it would be interesting to explore, through qualitative and quantitative research, how impostor syndrome affects members of different class positions, genders, ethnicities, abilities, sexual orientation, and so on, in different societies. On the one hand, qualitative research methods such as semi-structured interviews could help researchers understand how individuals with different identity traits, who have achieved upward social mobility, internalize the pressure to perform in different social settings and how they explain and describe their achievements. On the other hand, quantitative research may serve as a tool to understand the frequency of these impostor feelings amongst different groups and the difference between their perceived success and their actual success.

Some of the limitations of applying Goffman’s theory to this phenomenon are possibly overlooking some psychological characteristics, personality, and some of the internal processes, and focusing too much on the performative aspect that could contribute to it. In addition, as mentioned in earlier chapters, viewing this phenomenon strictly through a Goffmanesque lens could lead to a neglect of how structural phenomena could contribute to individuals feeling as if they are deceiving others. Nevertheless, Goffman has much to contribute to our understanding of impostor syndrome.

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