Can Feeling Like an Imposter Be Favorable? A Qualitative Study on the Role of Appraisal in Harnessing the Imposter Phenomenon for Growth

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CAN FEELING LIKE AN IMPOSTER BE FAVORABLE?
A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON THE ROLE OF APPRAISAL IN HARNESSING THE IMPOSTER PHENOMENON FOR GROWTH

by

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B.A. University of South Florida, 2018

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Industrial/Organizational Psychology in the Department of Psychology in the College of Sciences at the University of Central Florida Orlando, Florida

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ABSTRACT

The imposter phenomenon is a psychological experience characterized by feelings of self-doubt and personal incompetence that persist despite evidence of achievement and success. Employees with these imposter-like thoughts feel as if they ended up in notable roles and positions not because of merit, but from oversight or luck. Research and popular press articles have portrayed the imposter phenomenon as a negative experience, bringing costs to the individual’s well being and work life. Yet, findings from this study reveal that perhaps a favorable trajectory to the imposter experience might exist. To address this question, participants were identified and interviewed using a two-phase, sequential explanatory mixed-methods design. From their descriptions, the imposter phenomenon was largely seen as an opportunity for personal growth and professional development, one that challenged and motivated them toward continuous self-improvement. These results provide new insight into how individuals appraise and subsequently experience their imposter-like feelings. Several propositions were developed from this research, many of which highlight the role of cognitive appraisal as an important construct for better understanding how the imposter phenomenon can be experienced. Implications for future research are discussed.

Keywords: Imposter Phenomenon, Cognitive Appraisal, Qualitative Methods
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INTRODUCTION

“So for me, imposter syndrome is a feeling of being well, well out of your depth, yet already entrenched in the situation...it’s not a fear of failure, and it’s not a fear of being unable to do it. It’s more a sensation of getting away with something, a fear of being discovered, that at any time, someone is going to figure this out... But it’s important to note that it’s not all bad; there’s a lot of goodness, I think, in those feelings... It’s ok to be out of your depth sometimes...so long as you don’t freeze, so long as you harness the situation...and turn it into a force for good.”

– Mike Cannon-Brookes, TED Talk

Common intuition would suggest that high-achieving individuals have self-beliefs that are congruent with their merits and personal competencies. After all, how could an individual with strong ambition and overt success ever feel like they weren’t capable enough for their work? In reality, however, high-achieving individuals are frequently susceptible to these feelings of fraudulence (Vergauwe, Wille, Feys, De Fruyt, & Anseel, 2015), as many find themselves regularly questioning whether they are truly knowledgeable or have the right qualifications for the job. The term imposter phenomenon describes this internal experience of intellectual phoniness and broadly reflects one’s inability to internalize success, even in the face of objective evidence of such achievement (Clance & Imes, 1978; Whitman & Shanine, 2012).

The imposter phenomenon has been characterized as a “personal demand,” or an individual aspect that requires sustained psychological effort, leading to the depletion of personal resources (e.g., well-being, self-esteem; Crawford, Shanine, Whitman, & Kacmar, 2016; Hobfoll, 1989). As such, these imposter-like thoughts and feelings generally serve as an underlying source of stress, associated with higher reports of negative affect (Cozzarella & Major, 1990) and job dissatisfaction (Hutchins, Penney, & Sublett, 2018) among other outcomes (see Whitman & Shanine, 2012). Although the imposter phenomenon can generate stress, there is no inherent element of stress to this experience. According to the transactional model of stress,
stress is experienced not as an outcome, but as a process whereby individuals perceive and respond to environmental stimuli or events (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Critical to this process is the element of appraisal, or judgements about the relevance of an environmental stimuli to one’s well-being. Therefore, the experience of stress comes from our assessments of the situations we find ourselves in, not the situations themselves.

Prior work has theorized that stressors can be appraised as challenges, hindrances, and threats, which are each associated with unique positive and negative outcomes (Tuckey, Searle, Boyd, & Winefield, 2015). However, the imposter phenomenon has yet to be integrated within this framework. This brings up an important series of questions that drive this research. First, while it should be expected that the imposter phenomenon can be appraised as a hindrance or threat given its negative conceptualization in the popular press and scholarly literature, can it ever be appraised as a challenge? If it can, will these imposter-like thoughts and feelings parallel other challenge stressors and lead to positive outcomes (Podsakoff, LePine, & LePine, 2007)? In this study, the imposter phenomenon was investigated in conjunction with the transactional model of stress to explore how the imposter phenomenon is experienced, as well whether these imposter-like feelings could ever be favorable.

To address these questions, I used a phenomenological qualitative study design to inductively examine outcomes of the imposter phenomenon by way of stress appraisal. This methodology not only allows me to investigate what is experienced when someone feels like an imposter, but how such feelings are experienced (Creswell, 2013). This is a necessary first step to gain a better understanding of the potential upsides to the imposter experience, particularly given that the grounding for such proposition presently rests on anecdotal testaments and theory rather than empirical evidence.
From this work, several contributions to the literature are made. First, this thesis largely contributes to the imposter phenomenon literature. Prior work has primarily focused on the trait predictors and (negative) outcomes associated with the imposter experience (Whitman & Shanine, 2012), while less consideration has been given to the variables that explain these relationships. This research qualitatively explores the role of stress appraisal as one explanatory mechanism, suggesting that the relationships between the imposter phenomenon and outcomes are best explained through how the experience is appraised. Linking the imposter phenomenon and its outcomes through stress appraisal opens the door for new relationships to arise between the imposter phenomenon and positive outcomes, specifically when it is appraised as a challenge. Ample research on the imposter phenomenon demonstrates the individual costs associated with these feelings, but there has yet to be a single empirical investigation on the potential benefits. Venturing into this unexplored territory offers greater insight into the critical role of stress appraisal in creating different profiles of how the imposter phenomenon can be experienced, ultimately broadening the theoretical scope of the phenomenon itself.

This research also contributes to the stress literature. Stress researchers have been receiving increasing criticism for classifying stressors a priori and neglecting the study of threat appraisals altogether (see Horan, Nakahara, DiStaso, & Jex, 2020 for a review of these criticisms). These concerns were acknowledged and addressed in this study. Specifically, this research is grounded in the assumption that the imposter phenomenon is not an innately negative experience, addressing the first criticism. Additionally, all three appraisal types were carefully and intentionally considered during the content analysis of the data, addressing the second criticism. Taken together, findings from this study contribute to the stress literature by further
demonstrating the unique role of appraisal and the variation within it, particularly as it relates to the imposter phenomenon.

Finally, in the process of coding the appraisals and outcomes of the imposter experience, an unexpected theme was observed. In particular, participants described a number of strategies they used to address their feelings of imposterism, suggesting that coping is a critical factor in how the imposter phenomenon is experienced. Similar patterns of strategies emerged across the data, representing various combinations of problem-solving and emotion-focused coping. Coping has been theorized to follow cognitive appraisal (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987); therefore, this unanticipated contribution is in line with the nature of this research and helps provide a more coherent depiction of how the imposter phenomenon is experienced.

In the following sections, I review the imposter phenomenon and stress appraisal literatures. These reviews are intended to summarize the present state of the literature and highlight pertinent gaps. Importantly, these reviews provide rationale for the challenge made in this thesis against the popular and empirical assumption that the imposter phenomenon is “all bad all the time.” The introduction has been organized to conclude with my driving research question: Can the imposter phenomenon be appraised positively as an opportunity for growth?

**Imposter Phenomenon**

The term “imposter phenomenon” was originally coined by Clance and Imes (1978) to describe the tendency for high-achieving women to experience intense feelings of intellectual and professional fraudulence even in the face of great achievement. Although these women had an abundance of honors and accolades to reflect their competencies, the pervasive feeling of phoniness inhibited them from internalizing their success. Instead, they were overwhelmed by
perceptions of inauthenticity regarding their own accomplishments (Badawy, Gazdag, Bentley, & Brouer, 2018). At the inception of this discovery, Clance and Imes (1978) argued that these thoughts and feelings were experienced more frequently and more intensely by women than they were by men. Their rationale for this assertion drew from two areas of social psychology: gender differences in the attribution process and the influence of gender stereotypes on success expectations.

Leaning on the work of Deaux (1976), Clance and Imes attributed gender differences in the imposter phenomenon, in part, to gender differences in the attribution process. Attribution theory has been used to explain how people perceive the causality of events; that is, whether they are internally or externally based (Kelley & Michela, 1980). Regarding gender, women tend to attribute their successes to temporary, external causes (e.g., luck, effort) and their failures to more stable, internal causes (e.g., knowledge, ability). Men, on the other hand, typically exhibit the reciprocal pattern, such that success tends to be attributed to stable causes and failure to more temporary causes. These disparate propensities for the attribution of success were used by Clance and Imes (1978) as support for their observations, suggesting that women, more often than men, experience feelings of imposterism because they are less likely to ascribe their successes to a quality inherent to themselves.

Clance and Imes (1978) also relied on frequently held stereotypes about women, particularly women in the workplace, to further help explain the imposter-like feelings they were observing in this demographic. In particular, they leaned on the stereotype that women are intellectually less competent than men. First, they argued that women who already experience these imposter-like feelings in their professional lives are likely to believe they are consonant with this stereotype, further perpetuating the assumption that their achievements are a product of
some fluke rather than their own abilities. Alternatively, women who acknowledge their
achievements as their own are faced with the challenge of proving their intellectual worth, as
well as breaking a societal stigma. In this latter instance, feelings of imposterism are likely to be
stirred given the recurring hurdles these women must surmount to justify their accomplishments.

The seminal work of Clance and Imes (1987) set a precedent for gender as a key
antecedent to the imposter experience. However, it wasn’t long until this trend was challenged.
As more people learned about this research and the imposter phenomenon (IP) itself, it became
apparent that these feelings were perhaps not unique to women after all, as both men and women
were sharing stories of similar imposter-like experiences. Subsequent empirical work supported
the demographic diversity behind these stories, bringing clarity to the intersection of gender and
IP, by suggesting that the imposter phenomenon is actually a common experience in both men
and women (Imes, 1980; Topping & Kimmel, 1985; Vergauwe, Wille, Feys, De Fruyt, &
Anseel, 2015; Bechtoldt, 2015; Crawford, Shanine, Whitman & Kacmar, 2016). It is also worth
noting that the same finding held true across other demographic constructs, including age
(Cromwell, Brown, & Adair, 1990) and race (Ewing, Richardson, James-Myers, & Russell,
1996). Taken together, although the phenomenon was first observed in a sample of primarily
Caucasian women between the ages of 20 and 45 years, research suggests that demographic
differences do not, in fact, exist among those experiencing the imposter phenomenon. In light of
these findings, Gravois (2007) estimated that approximately 70% of all individuals will
experience imposter-like thoughts and feelings for at least some part of their professional lives.
This rather large statistic should bring awareness to the fact that a widespread number of
individuals who share these thoughts and feelings are inconspicuously existing in the workforce,
indicating a practical need to better understand the nuances of the phenomenon itself in order to aid these “impersonators” in navigating their feelings of fraudulence.

Early research on the IP continued in this inductive manner, shifting the focus next to establishing a clear conceptualization of the imposter experience and investigating the discriminability of the IP from similar constructs (e.g., self-esteem, self-monitoring, social anxiety; Chrisman, Pieper, Clance, Holland, & Glickauf-Hughes, 1995). Six characteristics of the IP were originally proposed by Clance (1985). However, later work refined these characteristics into three representative themes: (1) the attribution of success to an external factor, (2) the sense of having fooled others into overestimating one’s ability, and (3) the fear of being exposed as a fraud (Harvey & Katz, 1985; Bechtoldt, 2015). The first of these characteristics indicates that individuals with these imposter-like feelings lack confidence in their own abilities, inhibiting them from both taking pleasure in their achievements and believing that their successes are a product of their own merit (rather than luck). The second characteristic—deceiving others—suggests that feeling like an imposter involves a personal sense of inadequacy, resulting in evaluations of oneself that are less favorable than those from others. This perceived discrepancy between self- and other-appraisals leads self-proclaimed impersonators to believe they have fooled those around them into thinking they are more capable than they believe themselves to be (Whitman & Shanine, 2012). Finally, the third characteristic of the IP highlights the general sense of uneasiness that surrounds this perceived deceit. That is, there are often fearful thoughts around having one’s perceived fraudulence exposed, as well as the consequences that might follow such discovery.

Research following this theoretical work has largely been devoted to better understanding the predictors and outcomes of the IP, although it should be noted that more attention has been
given to the identification of predictors, particularly trait predictors, of the experience rather than its outcomes (Hutchins, Penney, & Sublett, 2018). Several personality traits have been identified as key antecedents to these imposter-like feelings (Whitman & Shanine, 2012). Specifically, a number of studies have indicated that individuals who identify with the thoughts and feelings of the IP tend to rate themselves high on neuroticism (Bernard, Dollinger, & Ramaniah, 2002), maladaptive perfectionism (Cromwell, Brown, & Adair, 1990; Henning, Ey, & Shaw, 1998), entitlement (i.e., narcissistic expectations/self-promotion; Gibson-Beverly & Schwartz, 2008), trait anxiety (Topping & Kimmel, 1985), and self-criticism (Thompson, Davis, & Davidson, 1998) and rate themselves low on extraversion (Ross, Stewart, Mugge, & Fultz, 2001), conscientiousness (Ross et al., 2001; Bernard et al., 2002), attribution to success (Topping & Kimmel, 1985), self-esteem, and self-appraisal (Chrisman, Pieper, Clance, Holland, & Glickauf-Hughes, 1995; Leary, Patton, Orlando, & Funk., 2000; McElwee & Yurak, 2007; for a full review, see Whitman & Shanine, 2012).

Although the extant literature offers a clear picture as to what personal characteristics tend to predict feelings of imposterism, research concerning the outcomes of these thoughts and feelings remains comparatively limited (Whitman & Shanine, 2012; Crawford, Shanine, Whitman, & Kacmar, 2016). Presently, it is understood that the IP is associated with low state self-esteem and high psychological distress (Cozzarelli & Major, 1990; Henning et al., 1998). Following episodes of perceived failure, individuals who experience the IP are more susceptible to depression, anxiety, guilt, and dissatisfaction (Thompson et al., 1998). Drawing from the organizational literature, more recent work has investigated employee-specific outcomes of the imposter experience, including increased emotional exhaustion (Whitman & Shanine, 2012), work-family conflict (Crawford et al., 2016), overwork, burnout (Legassie, Zibrowski, &
Goldszmidt, 2008), and continuance commitment (McDowell, Boyd, & Bowler, 2007) and decreased job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behaviors (Vergauwe et al., 2015), career striving, motivation to lead (Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016), and affective commitment (McDowell et al., 2007)

From this brief review, the individual and organizational ramifications of the IP are clear, leaving little room to believe that a light side to this phenomenon exists. However, some stressors that are assumed to be negative can actually be perceived as a learning and growth opportunity when considered through the lens of how they are appraised (Cheng & McCarthy, 2018; Follmer, Talbot, Kristof-Brown, Astrove, & Billsberry, 2018; Schaefer & Moos, 1998). This suggests that the IP as a positive experience could actually be one that has yet to be discovered, given that it has never been theorized from this perspective. Indeed, pushing the theoretical boundaries of the IP by investigating the mechanisms between the IP and its outcomes (a recent call in the literature; Hutchins et al., 2018; Crawford et al., 2016; Whitman & Shanine, 2012) could reveal that the IP is not experienced in the same way by everyone. Stress appraisal, a process which concerns one’s evaluation of an event rather than the event per se (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), is used to challenge the a priori assumption that feelings of imposterism always result in negative outcomes.

**Stress Appraisal**

The idea that perceptions of a stressor influence responses to, and the effects of stress, is not new. It has long been suggested that stressors, in general, vary in their effects across different individuals by virtue of the meaning they get assigned (Howard & Scott, 1965). For example, two employees might differ in whether they view an upcoming presentation as stressful
depending on their level of preparedness, comfortability with public speaking, or the consequences they believe will follow from having an (un)successful presentation. Theoretically, this concept of imbuing stimuli with meaning is central to Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) transactional theory of stress, which conceptualizes stress as a dynamic process between an individual and their environment.

The extent to which an environmental stimulus (e.g., person, event, situation) is deemed stressful is contingent on two forms of cognitive appraisal: primary and secondary. Primary appraisal is the assessment of relevance one’s environment has to their wellbeing. A stimulus in this environment appraised as relevant will lead to secondary appraisal, whereas an unassessed stimulus or a stimulus appraised as irrelevant will discontinue the process for that cue (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Secondary appraisal is the evaluation of one’s resources to determine if anything can be done to cope with the stimulus, and, if so, how it would be addressed. Although these two forms of appraisal were described as sequential, they can occur simultaneously or in a reciprocal fashion (i.e., coping resources inform relevance; Horan et al., 2020).

The process of stress appraisal under this theory reveals further nuance when considering the valence of these assessments. That is, is the stressor generally seen as something that is positive or negative for the individual? Importantly, this valence determines the resulting outcomes (Selye, 1956; 1974). In some instances, an environmental stimulus can be appraised as a potential detriment to one’s well-being, resulting in unfavorable outcomes (i.e., strain). In other instances, the same stimulus can be appraised as energizing or opportunistic to one’s well-being, resulting in favorable outcomes, albeit can sometimes be paired with strain (Cavanaugh, Boswell, Roehling, & Boudreau; 2000). In the previous example, an employee may see his upcoming presentation as an insurmountable amount of responsibility, whereas his colleague
might view the same presentation as an opportunity to showcase her skills. Thus, it is not that the presentation is inherently a positive or negative stressor, but that the individual appraises it as such.

**Challenge-Hindrance Stress Model**

The transactional theory of stress is a forerunner to a widely accepted and popular stress framework among academic and practitioner audiences known as the challenge-hindrance model of stress (CHM; Cavanaugh, Boswell, Roehling, & Boudreau, 2000). The CHM is used in occupational settings to explain the positive and negative effects of psychological stress from one’s job on performance and well-being (LaRocco, House, French, 1980; LePine et al., 2005). Notably, this model provides new terminology for positive and negative stressors, referring to them instead as challenge stressors (i.e., the potential for mastery and gain) and hindrance stressors (i.e., the potential to inhibit goal attainment), respectively.

The CHM originated from the work of Cavanaugh and colleagues (2000), where a sample of managers provided self-report data about their work stress. From this work, the researchers searched for an explanation to justify the inconsistent relationships they were finding between the reported work stressors and positive outcomes. The researchers soon discovered that the inconsistency of these relationships could be explained when the valence of the stressor was considered. That is, whether the stressor was appraised as a challenge or a hindrance. Challenge stressors, they defined, are “work-related demands or circumstances that, although potentially stressful, have associated potential gains for individuals” (p. 68). Hindrance stressors are “work-related demands or circumstances that tend to constrain or interfere with an individual’s work achievement” (p. 68; Cavanaugh et al., 2000). Challenge and hindrance stressors are each associated with unique outcomes, with challenge stressors demonstrating a net positive effect
(e.g., increased job satisfaction, performance via increased motivation, loyalty) and hindrance stressors demonstrating a net negative effect (e.g., turnover behavior, decreased work engagement; Podsakoff, LePine, & LePine, 2007; Lepine et al., 2005; Pearsall, Ellis, & Stein, 2009; Boswell, Olson-Buchanan, & LePine, 2004; Crawford et al., 2010).

The CHM offers a more measurable look at the process of stress appraisal, particularly in organizational settings, by bolstering the testability of the transactional theory’s central constructs. Indeed, the CHM has become a cornerstone framework in the occupational stress literature. However, it isn’t without criticism. According to Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) transactional theory of stress, stressors should be precisely differentiated based on three types of appraisal: challenge, hindrance, and threat (i.e., “work-related demands or circumstances that tend to be directly associated with [or have the potential to cause] personal harm or loss” (p. 133; Tuckey, Searle, Boyd, Winefield, & Winefield, 2015). Although these three forms of appraisal have been theoretically argued as conceptually distinct (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Folkman & Lazarus, 1985; Lazarus, 1991)—as well as statistically distinct more recently (Tuckey et al., 2015)—the shared quality of being broadly seen as negative that belongs to both hindrance appraisals and threat appraisals has led to the false assumption of conceptual equivalence in the stress literature (Lepine et al., 2005; Van de Broeck, de Cuyper, de Witte, & Vansteenkiste, 2010; Webster et al., 2011). As a result, threat stressors have been given significantly less attention in stress appraisal research, leaving an otherwise robust literature relatively incomplete (Tuckey et al., 2015; Horan et al., 2020).

Stress research, more broadly, has also received criticism for the omission of explicit stress appraisal measurement in empirical examinations of the stress process. That is, stressors have been classified as challenging or hindering rather than measured as such. This type of a
priori classification is not consistent with the transactional theory of stress and will be discussed next.

**Measuring Stress Appraisal**

Cognitive appraisal has been well-documented to play a critical role in the stressor-strain relationship (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Webster, Beehr, & Love, 2011). However, despite its importance, organizational scholars who ground their research in the CHM or the transactional theory of stress often pass over the variance accounted for by appraisal, classifying their stressor constructs *a priori* and making the assumption that, on average, most employees appraise these stressors the same way (LePine et al., 2005; Webster et al., 2011). In other words, many researchers lean on the assumption that there is homogeneity in how people see and experience stressors and choose to label stressor constructs ahead of time as challenging or hindering rather than measuring cognitive appraisal as part of the statistical model. By now, it should be clear that this violates the most fundamental tenet of the transactional theory of stress; that is, stressors are not inherently stressful (whether eustress or distress), but they are appraised as such. Thus, the seldom measurement and inclusion of cognitive appraisal in stress research reflects an incongruence with theory, such that stressors are ascribed meaning that is not inherent to them, and it disregards the main assumption of stress being appraised differently by different people (Searle & Auton, 2015).

This missing piece from the stress literature can be explained, in part, by the challenges associated with measuring cognitive appraisals. In fact, these challenges have not only been assumed to exist in this line of research, but were addressed directly by Cavanaugh and colleagues (2000), the researchers behind the CHM. They argued *against* measuring cognitive appraisal, particularly in cross-sectional research, because such practice amplifies measurement
error (e.g., memory bias, perception bias) and restricts construct validity. These concerns are fair and present a well-grounded need for measurement refinement. However, they shouldn't deter researchers from coming up with a more precise approach to studying cognitive appraisals, as appears to have been the case.

Webster et al. (2011) first attempted to provide a solution to this problem by providing participants with definitions of challenge appraisals and hindrance appraisals to guide their assessments on presented stressors. This approach was found to be acceptable and, from their research findings, supports the merit behind measuring cognitive appraisals when evaluating the stressor-strain relationship. From this work, researchers continued to find ways to better assess momentary appraisal, which led to the development of psychometrically sound scales (Searle & Auton, 2015) and the incorporation of these measures in event-based research designs (e.g., experience sampling methods; Ohly & Fritz, 2009; Tuckey et al., 2015; Casper & Wehrt, 2021). Together, these recent advancements have made it more feasible to measure stress appraisal in a manner that more accurately aligns with theory (Searle & Auton, 2015).

Another issue with classifying stressors a priori is that it eliminates the extent to which simultaneous appraisals can be theorized and tested. Here, simultaneous appraisal does not refer to the opposing views held by different people of the same situation or stimulus (e.g., some see the upcoming presentation as hindering while others see it as challenging), nor to the within-person variation from re-appraisal or different encounters with a situation or stimulus (e.g., on some occasions, the upcoming presentation is seen as hindering, whereas on others it is seen as challenging). Rather, simultaneous appraisal refers to when a single situation or stimulus is seen by the same individual as containing aspects that are both challenging and hindering (or threatening). For example, getting promoted is a stressful career event that offers an opportunity
for professional development and increased financial incentives, but it can also be accompanied with increased role complexity and unclear job demands. This view on appraisal is seldomly taken in the literature and should be further explored to better understand the full scope of influence cognitive appraisal has on outcomes.

Taken together, the merits of measuring cognitive appraisal are twofold: (1) It allows for a more accurate assessment of the stress process by assessing the causal underpinnings of the stressor-strain relationship, and (2) It deconstructs the overly simplistic assumption that stressors are always challenging, hindering, or threatening when in reality, what is considered stressful lies in the eye of the beholder. This is not to invalidate previous research based on a priori assumptions, particularly since there is some evidence that suggests stressors tend to have strong patterns in how they are appraised (e.g., death, employment termination; Cavanough et al., 2000). Rather, it is to encourage future researchers to opt for the precision of including and measuring cognitive appraisal in their research designs.

**Appraisals of the Imposter Phenomenon**

In this study, the imposter phenomenon is described as analogous to a stressor. A stressor is an environmental stimulus (i.e., condition or event; Bliese, Edwards, & Sonnentag, 2017) or outside force (Jex, Beehr, & Roberts, 1992) that causes subsequent individual reactions. The IP is an internal experience, making it akin to a stressor rather than a stressor itself. Previous research, however, has conceptualized the imposter phenomenon as a “personal demand,” or an aspect of an individual that requires sustained physical and/or psychological effort, potentially resulting in costs for the individual (Crawford et al., 2016). Similar to job demands, which are considered stressors, the imposter phenomenon as a “personal demand” is a resource depleting
experience, which impacts the level of one’s stress (Hobfoll, 1989). Thus, although the IP is not a stressor per se, it certainly has the capacity to induce stress, as well as other strain outcomes, making it analogous to a stressor.

In general, inconsistency in how one sees oneself in relation to others’ perceptions or the requirements of their job can be stressful. People strive for consistency between how they perceive themselves and their comparative standards, so when a perceived discrepancy exists (e.g., feeling like an imposter), the dissonance can be quite aversive (Swann, Johnson, & Bosson, 2009, Borman & Motowidlo, 1997; Johnson & Jackson 2009; Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson 2005; Hoffman & Woehr, 2006; Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994; Swann, Kwan, Polzer, & Milton, 2003; Burke, 2004; Ayduk, Mendes, Akinola, & Gyurak, 2008). However, the work of Meister and colleagues (2014, 2017, 2021) challenges this deep-rooted assumption. Specifically, they argue that the outcomes of having incongruent perceptions of oneself—whether within-person (i.e., oneself and one’s perception of the job qualifications) or between-persons (i.e., oneself and others’ perceptions of oneself)—are likely dependent on how this incongruence is appraised. Specifically, it’s not from the discrepancy itself, but from the appraisal of the discrepancy that engenders stress. Therefore, they suggest, when appraised as a challenge, discrepancies can function as an opportunity for development and growth.

Given that the imposter phenomenon is a form of this perceived incongruence (e.g., seeing oneself as less capable than what others perceive), the conceptual work of Meister and her team of researchers propagates the argument made in this thesis that perhaps the IP could have an upside. Although the IP has yet to be conceptually combined with stress appraisals, it is reasonable to assume, based on the existing literature, that the majority IP experiences are rooted in hindrance and threat appraisals. Appraising the IP as a hindrance would involve perceiving
these thoughts and feelings as an interference with achievement (e.g., obstructing task productivity), whereas appraising them as a threat would indicate that these thoughts and feelings are getting in the way of future success (e.g., not applying for a promotion). Although one’s imposter-like feelings can certainly be appraised as potentially harmful or threatening to future well-being, which would reinforce the existing IP literature, there is theoretical justification to believe that this might not always be the case. Should an individual appraise the IP as a challenge, they would see this demand as one that can be beneficial for their well-being (e.g., an opportunity for new skill acquisition).

Thus far, the argument for this proposition has been largely theoretical given the nascence of this research question, but one study by Leonhardt, Bechtoldt, and Rohrmann (2017) offers preliminary statistical evidence for support. In their research, the authors investigated the homogeneity of the IP using cluster-analytical statistical procedures to determine whether different groups of individuals with imposter-like feelings exist. Importantly, however, the basis for this study focused on the characteristics of the self-reported imposters rather than how such thoughts and feelings were appraised. The researchers found that individuals who scored high on the IP could be divided into two groups: those who showed the expected outcomes of the IP (e.g., strain) and those who did not show these outcomes. Interestingly, for the latter group, the pattern of outcomes more closely resembled those who scored low on the IP. The researchers explained these results by suggesting that two groups of imposters exist: “true imposters” and “strategic imposters,” with strategic imposters being those who adopt the imposter identity as a self-presentation tool, creating the opportunity to repeatedly under-promise and over-deliver. While this rationale is certainly interesting, the methodology used by Leonhardt et al. (2017) does not support this conclusion; thus, a number of explanations could be used to explain the
data. Nevertheless, the pattern of results from this study are both relevant and important, as they provide preliminary evidence that there is indeed variation in IP experiences. Rather than viewing this variation through the lens of motivation or intent, however, the mediating role of cognitive appraisal was examined.
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The objective of this research was to elaborate on existing theory through the use of inductive, phenomenological methodology. Phenomenology is a qualitative methodology used for describing the essence of a shared experience. Specifically, the output from this approach describes what individuals experience and how they experience it (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 2013). In the present study, this maps onto the questions of whether a positive light to the imposter phenomenon exists (i.e., what is experienced), and, if so, what might explain these different imposter-like experiences (i.e., how it is experienced). In turn, this research contributes to the IP and cognitive appraisal literatures by demonstrating that even the most seemingly negative stressor-like constructs can have an upside if appraised as a developmental opportunity.

Building off the work of Leonhardt and colleagues (2017), this research continues to explore the differentiation in imposter-like experiences. An interest of this study is to not only investigate whether high-IP individuals can report low-levels on negatively valenced constructs, as was examined in the aforementioned study, but also whether these same individuals can report high-levels on positively valenced constructs. This directionality is important, as it clarifies whether the proposed “positive” imposter-like profile is one that is defined by the absence of negative outcomes alone or involves a partnership with the presence of positive outcomes as well. Therefore, the first research question asks:

Research Question 1: What are the positive outcomes, if any, of feeling like an imposter?

Knowing that the imposter phenomenon is not experienced homogeneously by everyone (Leonhardt et al., 2017), the next question should be “Why?” In this study, cognitive appraisal was used as one possible mechanism to explain the relationship between the IP and its outcomes. It should be noted that causality is unable to be determined from the methodology chosen for this
study. Nevertheless, the findings from this research will provide preliminary evidence for the viability of cognitive appraisal as an explanatory mechanism, leaving future researchers with the opportunity to empirically test such proposition. Additionally, many criticisms of stress research were presented and should not be ignored in the present study. Thus, research question two and its sub-questions are intended to address these concerns and answer the question, “Why?”:

**Research Question 2:** What is the role of cognitive appraisal in connecting the imposter phenomenon with its outcomes?

2a: What are the outcomes associated with each of the three appraisal types?

2b: Is the imposter phenomenon ever appraised simultaneously as a challenge, hindrance, and/or threat?
METHOD

The design for this study employed two phases of data collection using a sequential explanatory mixed-methods approach, which involves collecting and analyzing quantitative and qualitative data in a single study to assist in explaining and interpreting the findings of the quantitative results (Ivankova, Creswell, & Stick, 2006). In the first phase, a baseline survey was distributed to identify individuals who felt like an imposter, yet did not appear to exhibit the negative outcomes of this experience (e.g., anxiety, emotional exhaustion, reduced job satisfaction; Whitman & Shanine, 2012). In the second phase, open-ended interviews were used to address the research questions. The method and analyses involved in each phase will be described separately.

Phase One Sampling Procedure

Data were collected from two sources: the University of Central Florida (UCF) and Prolific. The original intent for this study was to use a single sample (i.e., UCF). However, because not enough individuals participated in the interviews, a second sample was used. The details for each sample will be described next.

University of Central Florida (UCF)

Participants were recruited from a list of new hires obtained from the office of human resources at UCF. Organizational newcomers were specifically targeted, as the novelty and unfamiliarity of a new job may lead workers to question their own competence and abilities (Kark, Meister, & Peters, 2021). Participants were administrative/professional employees (i.e., non-faculty and non-student employees) hired in 2020 on active employment. These employees were contacted through email with an invitation to take part in a research study designed to better understand “experiences at work in the early stages of employment.” Prior to beginning the
survey, participants were presented with an informed consent notice; in this notice, participants
were told they might be selected for a follow-up interview to discuss their experiences. Of the
274 individuals who were contacted, 75 met our eligibility criteria (i.e., 18 years of age or older
and currently employed) and completed the survey. The sample was predominantly female
(74.7%) and white (69.3%), and the average age of all participants was 39.2 years ($SD = 12.4$
years).

**UCF Measures**

**Imposter Phenomenon.** Imposter phenomenon was measured using the 20-item Clance
Imposter Phenomenon Scale (CIPS; Clance, 1985). An example item is, “I can give the
impression that I’m more competent than I really am.” Items were answered on a 1 to 5 scale (1
= *not at all true*, 5 = *very true*). Cronbach’s alpha was $\alpha = .94$.

**Burnout.** Burnout was measured using seven items from the work-related burnout
subscale of the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI; Kristensen, Biarritz, Villadsen, &
Christensen, 2005). A representative item is, “Do you feel worn out at the end of the working
day” Items were answered on a 1 to 5 scale (1 = *never*, 5 = *always*). Cronbach’s alpha was $\alpha = .88$.

**Anxiety.** Anxiety was measured using the seven item General Anxiety Disorder scale
(GAD; Spitzer, Kroenke, Williams, & Lowe, 2006). A representative item is, “Over the last two
weeks, how often have you felt nervous, anxious, or on edge?” Items were answered on a 1 to 4
scale (1 = *not at all*, 4 = *nearly every day*). Cronbach’s alpha was $\alpha = .91$.

**Depression.** Depression was measured using the nine item Patient Health Questionnaire
(PHQ; Kroenke, Spitzer, & Williams, 2001). A representative item is, “Over the last two weeks,
how often have you felt down, depressed, or hopeless?” Items were answered on a 1 to 4 scale (1 = not at all, 4 = nearly every day). Cronbach’s alpha was $\alpha = .84$.

**Job Satisfaction.** Job satisfaction was measured using three items from the Michigan Organizational Assessment Questionnaire (MOAQ; Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins, & Klesh, 1979). This subscale assesses global job satisfaction. A representative item is, “All in all, I am satisfied with my job.” Items were answered on a 1 to 5 scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Cronbach’s alpha was $\alpha = .86$.

**Work Engagement.** Work engagement was measured using the shortened, nine item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9; Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006). A representative item is, “At my work, I feel bursting with energy.” Items were answered on a 1 to 7 scale (1 = never, 7 = always). Cronbach’s alpha was $\alpha = .93$.

**Work Role Performance.** Work role performance was measured using nine items measuring three subdimensions of individual work behavior (Griffin, Neal, & Parker, 2007): proficiency (“I carry out the core parts of my job well”), adaptivity (“I learn new skills to help me adapt to changes in my core tasks”), and proactivity (“I make changes to the way my core tasks are done”). Items were answered on a 1 to 5 scale (1 = never, 5 = almost always). Cronbach’s alpha was $\alpha = .92, \alpha = .97, \alpha = .94$, respectively.

**Organizational Commitment.** Organizational commitment was measured with the six-item versions of the affective and continuance commitment scales (Meyer & Allen, 1997). A representative item from the affective scale is, “This organization has a great deal of personal meaning for me,” and a representative item from the continuance commitment scale is, “I feel that I have very few options to consider leaving this organization.” The items for each scale were
answered on a 1 to 5 scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Cronbach’s alphas were \( \alpha = .82 \) and \( \alpha = .81 \), respectively.

**Core Self-Evaluations.** Core self-evaluations were measured with the twelve item Core Self-Evaluation Scale (CSES; Judge, Erez, Bono, & Thoresen, 2003). A representative item is, “I am confident I get the success I deserve in life.” Items were answered on a 1 to 5 scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Cronbach’s alpha was \( \alpha = .87 \).

**UCF Data Analysis**

The survey data were analyzed by first determining which participants reported feelings of imposterism and identifying those that had scale scores above or below the midpoint for the positively and negatively valenced measures, respectively. This approach helped me to identify individual outliers who did not experience the typical negative outcomes of the imposter experience, yet still felt like an imposter at work. For example, anxiety typically demonstrates a positive correlation with the imposter phenomenon (Thompson, Davis, & Davidson, 1998), so I looked for participants who rated high imposter-like feelings (i.e., scale score greater than or equal to the midpoint) and low ratings of anxiety (i.e., scale score less than or equal to the midpoint). These participants would be considered eligible on this particular measure, as having lower ratings on anxiety goes against the expected relationship. Importantly, participants were required to satisfy this pattern of relationships on eight of the nine measures to be invited to take part in a follow-up interview.¹ Six participants reported high imposter-like feelings and satisfied

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¹ Note that 12 measures were included in the survey (subdimensions scored separately). A decision was made to remove adaptive performance, proactive performance, and continuance commitment from our selection criteria for the following reasons: (1) Low differentiation, as many participants were above the midpoint of the scale; (2) The constructs weren’t a good fit for the criterion we were trying to measure; and (3) The correlations between the imposter phenomenon and adaptive and proactive work role performance in this study were non-significant.
all nine outcome measures, whereas seven participants met the same criteria but only satisfied eight of the nine measures.

**Prolific**

The targeted number of interviews to sufficiently reach thematic saturation for this study was between 15 and 20 participants (Polkinghorne, 1989). Since this target number was unmet from the UCF sample alone, participants were also recruited from a co-occurring study led by Dr. Mark Ehrhart on Prolific. In the final wave of data collection for this Prolific study, participants were asked if they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview. The measures used in the Prolific study shared considerable overlap with the measures used in the UCF sample. The sample was predominantly male (61.9%), and the average age of all participants was 36 years ($SD = 9.68$ years).

**Prolific Measures**

**Imposter Phenomenon.** The imposter phenomenon was measured using the same scale from the UCF sample. Cronbach’s alpha was $\alpha = .94$.

**Neuroticism.** Neuroticism was measured using the ten-item marker from the International Personality Item Pool (IPIP; Goldberg, 1999). A representative item is, “I get stressed out easily.” Items were answered on a 1 to 5 scale ($1 = very inaccurate, 7 = very accurate$). Cronbach’s alpha was $\alpha = .91$.

**Self-Esteem.** Self-esteem was measured using ten items from the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965). A representative item is, “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.” Items were answered on a 1 to 7 scale ($1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree$). Cronbach’s alpha was $\alpha = .94$.  

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**Negative Affect.** Negative affect was measured using ten items of the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). A representative item is, “Over the past two weeks, I have felt nervous.” Items are answered on a 1 to 5 scale (1 = *very slightly or not at all*, 5 = *extremely*). Cronbach’s alpha was $\alpha = .90$.

**Workplace Anxiety.** Workplace anxiety was measured using eight items developed by McCarthy, Trougakos, and Cheng, 2016. A representative item is, “I am overwhelmed by thoughts of doing poorly at work.” Items are answered on a 1 to 5 (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Cronbach’s alpha was $\alpha = .95$.

**Occupational Stress.** Occupational stress was measured using four items from the Subjective Stress Scale (Motowidlo, Packard, & Manning, 1986). A representative item is, “I feel a great deal of stress because of my job.” Items are answered on a 1 to 5 (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Cronbach’s alpha was $\alpha = .89$.

**Job Satisfaction.** Job satisfaction was measured using the same scale from the UCF sample. Cronbach’s alpha was $\alpha = .96$.

**Affective Commitment.** Affective commitment was measured using the same scale from the UCF sample. Cronbach’s alpha was $\alpha = .94$.

**Work Engagement.** Work engagement was measured using the same scale from the UCF sample. Cronbach’s alpha was $\alpha = .95$.

**Burnout.** Burnout was measured using the same scale from the UCF sample. Cronbach’s alpha was $\alpha = .92$.

**Well-Being.** Well-being was measured using five items from the Brief Resilience Scale (Smith, Dalen, Wiggins, Tooley, Christopher, & Bernard, 2008). A representative item is, “I
have felt cheerful and in good spirits.” Items were answered on a 1 to 5 scale (1 = at no time, 5 = all of the time). Cronbach’s alpha was $\alpha = .93$.

**Task Performance.** Task performance was measured using four items developed by Williams and Anderson, 1991. A representative item is, “I adequately complete my assigned duties at work.” Items were answered on a 1 to 7 scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Cronbach’s alpha was $\alpha = .78$.

**Prolific Data Analysis**

A similar analytical method as described earlier was used to identify eligible participants in the Prolific sample. Of the 210 participants surveyed, 20 scored high on imposter-like feelings, met the midpoint criteria on at least 10 of the 12 measures, and indicated they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview.

**Phase Two Sampling Procedure**

The thirteen participants identified in the UCF sample were contacted about their eligibility for a follow-up interview. An informed consent notice was attached to the email. Eleven participants scheduled and completed an interview. Participants held leadership ($N = 3$) and non-leadership ($N = 8$) positions in jobs including legal coordinator, fitness director, academic advisor, training specialist, and vice president. The sample was predominantly female (81.8%) and white (72.7%), ranging in age from 23 to 52 years of age ($M = 34.3$ years, $SD = 10.6$ years) and averaging 6.1 months ($SD = 4.1$ months) in their current positions at UCF.

Additionally, the twenty participants identified in the Prolific sample were contacted about their eligibility for a follow-up interview. Four participants scheduled and completed an interview. These participants held positions in jobs including NASA flight controller, computer
technician, and public affairs. Participants were predominantly male (75%), ranging in age from 33 to 65 years of age ($M = 45.7$ years of age, $SD = 13.7$ years of age) and averaging 8.75 years ($SD = 3.4$ years) in their current positions. As indicated by the average tenure of this sample, these individuals were not newcomers (<1 year) to their job. The implications of this difference will be discussed in a later section. Lastly, in both samples, interview participants were compensated $10 to Amazon.com for their participation.

**Phase Two Interviews**

All interviews were held over Zoom and lasted about 30 minutes. As the interviewer, I provided a definition and an example of the imposter phenomenon at the beginning of the interview and then asked participants five open-ended questions, with several probes in between, about the participants’ experience with imposter-like feelings at work (Appendix C). Open-ended questions were used to avoid preconceived ideas about the imposter phenomenon and stimulate reflective thinking about the imposter experience. At the end, I opened the floor to the participants to elaborate on their responses and conclude with any final thoughts about their experience. Written records of the interviews were obtained through audio recording (Voice Memos) and professional transcription (Scribie), which I reviewed for accuracy.

**Phase Two Data Analysis**

I conducted a conventional content analysis to identify themes describing the outcomes of the imposter phenomenon as they relate to how the experience was appraised. This approach allowed me to lean on the data, rather than the literature, to derive coding categories. First, I read the transcripts and recorded analytic memos, which reflect the main ideas, patterns, and interesting comments found throughout the data. Another coder with an Ed.D. in organizational
leadership independently followed the same process. The coders met to compare notes and discuss emerging codes. Common experiences were identified and grouped together to form codes of imposter experiences. Both coders informally went through frame-of-reference training, using the memos as a basis for discussion and practice, and applied this codebook to the transcripts using NVivo 10.0 until coding consensus was reached, at which point I completed the remaining interviews independently. Finally, I reviewed the data coded to each construct and identified inductive themes related to how the imposter phenomenon is appraised and the outcomes associated with these appraisals. During this process, unexpected themes emerged related to the strategies used to cope with feeling like an imposter, among others.

Given that interviews were conducted in two different samples, my approach to analysis consisted of independently examining the first 11 interviews (UCF) using the analytical method described above. Then, I applied the codebook to the last 4 interviews (Prolific) and assessed how well the codes and themes mapped on to this supplementary sample in light of the temporal differences in their current job tenure. Since participants in both samples had similar reports of their imposter experiences, the samples were merged together and will be presented in conjunction hereafter (N = 15).
RESULTS

In the following section, I outline the main findings from this study, including descriptions of the imposter experience and the corresponding response strategies. Figure 1 illustrates these results. Overall, there was strong evidence that the imposter phenomenon can result in positive outcomes, particularly when it is appraised as a challenge, or an opportunity for learning and growth. Although this was the predominant theme in this sample, participants did not always see their imposter-like feelings in a solely challenging manner. While some learned how to harness these seemingly negative feelings for personal and professional development, others viewed their imposterism as something that was simultaneously both favorable and unfavorable. In addition, a number of emergent themes appeared from the data, such as how these imposter-like feelings motivated coping responses, the extent to which positive outcomes might be “too much of a good thing,” whether the imposter phenomenon is experienced as a self-concept or as a response to change, and how COVID-19 disrupted organizational operations and the employee experience, resulting in feelings of imposterism. Each of these themes are reviewed in the sections below, incorporating illustrative quotes that support the discussion, as well as theoretical propositions that summarize the suggested findings.

Qualitative Analyses

Research Question 1: What are the positive outcomes, if any, of feeling like an imposter?

When asked to describe experiences with the imposter phenomenon and reflect on how these feelings have influenced their daily job performance and careers at large, the interviewees frequently made comments about the positive effect feeling like an imposter at work had on their personal and professional development. While just about all participants reflected, to some degree, on the positive aspects of the imposter experience, the nature of these outcomes varied.
Specifically, the participants connected their experiences with the imposter phenomenon to performance, psychological, and relational outcomes.

Regarding performance outcomes, previous research on the imposter phenomenon describes the tendency for individuals to shy away from their work responsibilities when such feelings arise (Whitman & Shanine, 2012). However, it was frequently reported by interviewees in this study that feeling like an imposter drove them to do the opposite. That is, it drove them to be more engaged and work harder. Several interviewees felt that their imposter-like feelings led them to be more attentive to their responsibilities at work. One participant, who was new to her job, said, “I learned a lot of aspects about my job that I don’t think I would have necessarily paid attention to if I wasn’t feeling the pressure [from these feelings].” Others reported similar experiences, such as being more mindful to check that tasks were done correctly or spending an increased amount of time preparing for various events. Further, many organizational newcomers with these imposter-like feelings described the increased effort they put into their jobs to prove that they were meant to be there. One participant described the 90-day employment probationary period as an external pressure to prove to both her supervisor and herself that she was a good hire. Similarly, another respondent reported that she “didn’t want to be seen as someone who isn’t capable and is slacking, so [she] would work extra hard.” These examples indicate that, for some, feeling like an imposter had a positive effect on how they viewed and performed their job. Given that this sample consisted of both organizational newcomers and more tenured employees, it became apparent that these positive pressures to perform better might demonstrate a lasting impact. In particular, a more experienced participant who was reflecting on the many encounters he has had with the imposter phenomenon throughout his career said, “feeling the way I did and forcing myself to put in the work opened doors for me and helped me climb the ladder to get to
where I am today.” An executive-level manager echoed these thoughts saying, “At the inception of a career, that’s when I think these [feelings] were the most problematic, and they propelled me to work harder and faster. Now, I’m established and have substantial accomplishments.”

Thus, feeling like an imposter at work can help individuals perform well at their current job, with such efforts potentially leading them to long-term success and a promising career.

Further, the existing literature on the imposter phenomenon, as previously discussed, has linked this experience to a number of psychological outcomes, including depression, anxiety, guilt, and dissatisfaction. Within the work context, these imposter-like feelings have also been linked to feeling emotionally exhausted and burnt out, having a decreased commitment to one’s job, and a lessened motivation to do well and be proactive in planning one’s career. Holistically, this paints quite a negative picture of the imposter experience with regard to psychological outcomes, yet data from this study suggests otherwise. Specifically, an increased motivation to better oneself was the most frequently reported outcome from participants bar none. Results from a word frequency analysis indicate that the word “motivation” and its stems (e.g., motivate, motivating, motivated) came up 41 times throughout the interviews. Participants generally felt that “the expectation to perform is good” and that “it should be used as motivation and be something that is encouraged.” Although many participants shared this perspective, the driver behind the motivation was not as uniform. For example, some were motivated for external reasons, such as managing others’ impressions of oneself. One participant said, “it’s definitely something that is motivating; it fires me up for sure. I still want to impress, I want to show that I belong.” This was not the case for all participants, however, as many were internally motivated to prove to themselves that they were qualified for the position: “there’s motivation in proving yourself; not to them, but to yourself, that you can match their expectations and the level that
The important takeaway from these testaments is, as one participant astutely stated, that “fear should not be the driver of the motivation,” and this did not appear to be the case in our interviews, as many adopted the perspective for self-improvement. In turn, these efforts yielded boosts in self-efficacy and a state of self-actualization for many. Statements of feeling more confident in one’s abilities, having a greater understanding of one’s work ethic, and recognizing one’s desire to learn and be better were frequently discussed in conjunction with this motivational component. Through these imposter-like feelings and the corresponding drivers and efforts put in to reconcile them, participants were able to realize their full potential and learn how to leverage their abilities in order to reach this potential. As one participant concluded in her interview, “I accept that I’m never going to know everything and that I’m always going to feel like I don’t know everything to its fullest, so I just have to work harder and do my best.”

Lastly, a few participants noted that their experiences with the imposter phenomenon positively influenced their relationships at work, helping them establish rapport with others in their office. In particular, these participants felt that they were able to have meaningful conversations about their feelings, which helped strengthen the relationships they held. This was described by one participant who said, “It’s been really nice to connect with other young professionals and know that I’m not alone in this.” Additionally, some of the leaders in this sample felt that their imposter-like feelings gave them a new perspective on managing their followers. This can be exemplified by one leader who described the empathy she now has for her followers and the people she works with who might also share these feelings. Being able to empathize with others in the workplace is a key part of effective leadership and improving human interactions in general, and because of her personal experience with the imposter phenomenon, this participant now feels like her ability to be empathetic has been greatly
improved. Another leader echoed additional benefits to empathy, saying "if people can recognize the emotions in themselves and others, then I think this parity would even out feelings of inferiority or imposter syndrome." This suggests that having empathy around others’ experiences with the imposter phenomenon can not only make you more understanding of what other people might be going through, but it can ameliorate your own experience with these thoughts and feelings as well. Taken together, feeling like an imposter can lead an individual to establish new relationships and foster existing ones, all while becoming a more empathetic and emotionally intelligent leader.

*Proposition 1: The imposter phenomenon is not an inherently negative experience, as feeling like an imposter can have a positive impact on an individual’s work performance, psychological well-being, and relational experiences.*

*Research Question 2: What is the role of cognitive appraisal in connecting the imposter phenomenon with its outcomes?*

In this study, I not only wanted to investigate whether individuals experiencing the imposter phenomenon could ever see it as favorable, but, if they did, why they saw it in such a way. Drawing from the transactional model of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), I used cognitive appraisal to argue that one’s experience with the imposter phenomenon could be seen by some as a hindrance or a threat and by others as a challenge. Prior research suggests that each of these three types of cognitive appraisal are associated with different outcomes (Tuckey et al., 2015). Given that participants in this study reported numerous positive outcomes that they have associated with feeling like an imposter, which starkly contrasts the totality of the existing imposter phenomenon literature, then perhaps this can be attributed, at least in part, to the manner in which this experience is appraised.
After describing their experience with the imposter phenomenon, participants were then asked to think about how these feelings influenced their experience at work or their ability to perform their job. If they needed to be honed in on the intent of this question, they were probed with the following: Do you think these imposter-like feelings were something that held you back or pushed you to be better? Overwhelmingly, participants placed the most emphasis on appraising the imposter experience as a challenge. In fact, reports from all participants indicated that some aspect of feeling like an imposter was seen as positively challenging. Nevertheless, instances of this experience being appraised as a hindrance or threat did also come up during the interviews.

Challenge stressors, although potentially stressful, are viewed as opportunities associated with the potential for personal gains or growth. In relation to the imposter phenomenon, appraising this experience as a challenge largely took the form of seeing it as something that pushed them to learn and be a better employee. There were many accounts of this, but one person expressed this appraisal type well, saying “I think that [feeling like an imposter] makes me want to do 10 times better than I feel like the expectation is, so I’ll work extra hard; it’s really helped me understand my own work ethic and how hard I’m willing to work for things.” In contrast, some participants alluded to elements of hindrance and threat appraisal during their interviews. Hindrance stressors are viewed as obstacles to achievement, whereas threat stressors are viewed as anticipated personal harm or loss. These two negative appraisal types can be best differentiated by the underlying expectations. That is, the expectation for appraising a stimulus as a hindrance is that something good will not happen (or at least be delayed or more difficult to attain), whereas the expectation for appraising a stimulus as a threat is that something bad will happen. In relation to the imposter phenomenon, hindrance appraisals were predominantly
characterized by seeing the experience as something that restricted their capabilities. For example, one participant said, “At one point, they were negatively impacting my work because I spent too much time working to try to be perfect.” Threat appraisals, on the other hand, were mainly at play during the application process. During these periods, participants questioned whether they should apply for their current job because of the doubts they had about their qualifications for the position or the anticipated fear of being turned away. As one said, “I came rather late to this position because I spent a lot of time feeling like this wasn’t my role. I wasn’t even applying for the positions I was aspiring to because I didn’t think I could do them.”

All told, the imposter phenomenon should not be assumed to be hindering or threatening, as many participants saw this experience as something that has been beneficial to their personal growth and development. This validates the recent call in the stress literature for researchers to be cautious in classifying stressors *a priori* and assuming that stressors are uniformly appraised as challenging, hindering, or threatening (Horan et al., 2020). Indeed, while some stressors typically, or on average, tend to lean more in one direction (Cavanaugh et al., 2000), the merits of knowing whether a shared, alternate perspective exists and whether positive outcomes are probable can have a great impact on how employees are guided through their stressful experiences at work (Webster et al., 2011). As one participant eloquently said, “Stress doesn't always have to mean it's a bad thing, it's how I respond to it. I think I’ve learned that how I react to it is what makes it good or bad.”

*Proposition 2: The imposter phenomenon should not be assumed to be a hindering or threatening experience. Individuals who appraise the imposter phenomenon as a challenge will instead view it as an opportunity for learning, self-improvement, and personal and professional development.*
2a: What are the outcomes associated with each of the three appraisal types?

Appraisals of the imposter phenomenon were typically described in conjunction with work-related outcomes. First, many of the positive outcomes outlined in Research Question 1 were connected to appraising one’s imposter-like feelings as a challenge. This link has been the predominant focus of the analyses thus far, but the general takeaway is that appraising the imposter phenomenon as a challenge, or an opportunity for learning and growth, typically led participants to feel more engaged in their work and more motivated to be a better employee. As with any challenge stressor, the outcomes were not uniformly beneficial to the individual (Cavanaugh, Boswell, Roehling, & Boudreau, 1998), as some participants also noticed deficits to their general well-being. This emerged as a theme among select participants and will be elaborated upon in a later section.

When participants appraised the imposter phenomenon as a hindrance, or something that restricted their capabilities, they frequently reported feeling overwhelmed and stressed, being slower at completing work tasks from perfectionistic tendencies, or engaging in ruminating behaviors about their perceived shortcomings throughout the day. To illustrate, one participant said, “Sometimes I feel like maybe I didn’t [support the student] in the best way, and I feel inadequate and then stressed. I’ll go home and think, ‘I really feel like I didn’t do a good job’... It’s never gotten to the point of thinking about quitting, but there have definitely been times where I’ve felt really, really burnt out and needed to take a break away [from work].” Similarly, participants who appraised their imposter-like feelings as a threat reported feelings of negative affect, stress, and numerous incidents of self-handicapping. When one participant saw an opportunity for a promotion, she said, “I almost didn’t apply because I was so nervous about the
workload and making the [upward] leap; it was crippling. When I got the job, I just panicked. I didn’t know whether I should accept it or not.”

The outcomes associated with each of the cognitive appraisals outlined above map on to the delineating model proposed by Tuckey et al. (2015) regarding the distinction between the three types of appraisal. Specifically, Tuckey and colleagues found that appraisal influences well-being, such that challenge appraisals were associated with enthusiasm, hindrances with fatigue, and threats with anxiety. Indeed, this is parallel to what was found in this study, as participants reported feeling “engaged/motivated,” “stressed/burned out,” and “nervous/panicked,” with the aforementioned appraisals, respectively.

Proposition 3: The outcomes associated with the imposter phenomenon are mediated by how this experience is appraised. Challenge appraisals are associated generally with outcomes pertaining to personal development and self-improvement, hindrance appraisals with exhaustion and other psychological strains, and threat appraisals with anxiety and avoidance behaviors.

2b: Is the imposter phenomenon ever appraised simultaneously as a challenge, hindrance, and/or threat?

Throughout the interviews, it became evident that participants did not always maintain a singular appraisal of their imposter-like feelings. Said differently, it was not the case that a participant always saw the imposter phenomenon as a challenge, hindrance, or threat. Rather, their appraisal of these same imposter-like feelings would often be inconsistent or ambivalent. This within-person appraisal of the imposter phenomenon manifested itself in two ways. First, for some participants, there was a between-situation experience, where the appraisal changed during two separate encounters, such that it was seen as a challenge on some occasions and a
hindrance of threat on others. One participant who managed direct reports said that when she notices her imposter-feelings surfacing during a work task, “One of three things happens: I try to pull on some of my strengths and figure it out, I hit the ‘screw it’ button and delegate the task because I don’t feel confident in it and others know more than me, or I put it aside and deal with it later. Truthfully, it depends on the day.” Although this quote highlights the behavioral outcomes of the appraisal more than the cognitive appraisal itself, the underlying appraisals can be strongly inferred. That is, on some days, this leader feels challenged to complete the work task by “figuring it out,” whereas on other days she might feel more hindered by her feelings of imposterism in completing the task both successfully and in a timely manner.

Simultaneous appraisals also took the form of concurrently making two or more appraisals of a single stressor, but this experience could be seen as containing a combination of elements that are categorically challenging, hindering, and/or threatening. For example, during the interview, one participant was describing her transition to a higher-level job and mentioned that she felt most like an imposter during this period of change. She labeled her experience with the imposter phenomenon as a “double-edged sword.” When asked to elaborate on what this meant, she said “There’s no question about it. It was a strong motivator to learn quickly and keep moving forward and upward in my career. I worked as hard as I could to prove myself and make friends. However, in order to [move forward in your career], you need to go into a new job now knowing how to do everything, otherwise, if you don’t, it’s sort of a parallel move and you’re not moving up. But it can be really stressful starting a new job and feeling like you’re short in your arsenal. You feel like, ‘Oh, God, they’re going to find out any time that I’m not as qualified as I made it sound.’” This experience with the imposter phenomenon is quite cyclical. Specifically, a person starts a new job and feels out of place or unqualified, they then harness
these feelings as fuel to work hard and prove their competence, which, in turn, advances their skill and promotability, thus leading to more career opportunities. When these higher-level opportunities are accepted, they once again find themselves in a place of vulnerability and perceived fraudulence. All the while, they are simultaneously feeling challenged and out of their league during these early days of a new position. Importantly, not all instances of this simultaneous appraisal occurred during periods of transition, as other participants could see both helping and hindering elements of the imposter phenomenon in their more routine tasks and responsibilities across both work and nonwork life domains. This theme will be returned to in the “Emergent Themes” section below.

Proposition 4: The imposter phenomenon is not always appraised uniformly by an individual. In some instances, one’s appraisal can change, such that the nature of relevance the experience has to one’s well-being can vary across occasions. In other instances, one might hold a more ambivalent appraisal of the experience, comprising elements from a combination of the three types of cognitive appraisal.

Emergent Themes
During the process of coding appraisals and outcomes of the imposter phenomenon, four unexpected themes were observed in the data: how participants coped with the imposter phenomenon, times when the positive imposter experience was “too much of a good thing,” inconsistency in how the imposter phenomenon was being characterized, and the influence of COVID-19 on new employees’ imposter-like feelings. These themes are called ‘emergent themes,’ as they were unanticipated, yet highly prevalent throughout the interviews. Emergent themes are common when inductive approaches to qualitative research are used (Given, 2008).
These themes complement the existing findings and provide further insight into how the imposter phenomenon is experienced.

**Coping with the Imposter Phenomenon**

As argued in the transactional theory of stress, two stages of appraisal occur when evaluating a stressor (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In primary appraisal, individuals determine the relevance of environmental stimuli to their personal well-being. If deemed relevant, resources are then evaluated in secondary appraisal to determine if anything can be done to cope with the stimuli. Coping, therefore, encompasses the cognitive and behavioral efforts used to manage stimuli that are appraised as exceeding one’s resources. Two basic categories of coping are widely recognized: problem-focused coping, aimed at “managing or altering the problem causing the distress,” and emotion-focused coping, aimed at “regulating emotional responses to the problem” (p. 150; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). However, despite this distinction, there is little agreement on the structure of coping, as over 100 coping taxonomies and 400 lower-order categories of coping have been proposed in the literature (Stanislawski, 2019; Skinner, Edge, Altman, & Sherwood, 2003). Indeed, even Lazarus (1996) later admitted that his distinction of coping was perhaps an oversimplification of the way in which coping works. Given the lack of consensus in the coping literature, qualitative research is a suitable method for the exploration of different coping strategies employed by people experiencing the imposter phenomenon. The coping circumplex model (CCM) proposed by Stanislawski (2019), which posits that the coping categories of problem-focused and emotion-focused coping should not be mutually exclusive, will be used as a guiding framework. Importantly, the framework consists of four bipolar dimensions (i.e., problem solving, problem avoiding, positive emotional coping, negative emotional coping) with four other strategies nested within the circumplex (i.e., efficient (P+,
helplessness (P-, E-), hedonic disengagement (P-, E+), preoccupation with the problem (P+, E-) that represent a blend of two of the four bipolar dimensions. Together, the model depicts eight strategies of coping.

Before presenting the themes, it should be noted that participants in this study had a tendency to represent more positive approaches to coping. This is likely, in large part, due to the selection process of identifying individuals who were expected to have a more positive imposter experience. Thus, the omission of the more maladaptive coping strategies (e.g., helplessness, negative emotional coping, problem avoidance) does not mean that such strategies are seldom used when coping with the imposter phenomenon (Hutchins, Penney, & Sublett, 2018). Rather, a more plausible explanation is that the individuals who are more likely to use them are underrepresented in this sample. Therefore, the following strategies identified below should be interpreted as relevant to those who see the imposter phenomenon as an opportunity for growth as opposed to the imposter experience more generally.

In this sample, participants largely coped with their imposter-like feelings using a configuration of problem solving and positive emotional coping. Labeled as “efficient” coping, this strategy involves having optimistic expectations about the action taken to solve a problem through positive reinterpretation and a growth mindset. Given the discussion of the data thus far, it is not surprising that this was the most frequently used strategy. In particular, participants described a number of introspective strategies, including reframing the situation to be more developmental, labeling feelings and choosing how to respond, and engaging in “cognitive interception,” a term created by a participant that reflects taking control of one’s thought processes to avoid negative thought spirals. Regarding this strategy, the participant provided an example of how he uses cognitive interception when having doubts about his qualifications for
the job: “My interception point, mentally, when the imposter syndrome arises is that I went through the process, I adhered to the process, I survived the process, and I made it. That’s always a validating moment.” Intercepting imposter-like thoughts, among other introspective strategies, allowed participants to nip these negative self-perceptions in the bud and reframe them into positive terms. For many, this looked like taking a perceivably negative personal state and making it something they could learn from.

Additionally, spiritual faith, as another blend of problem solving and positive emotional coping for the purposes of growth and life improvement, was mentioned a few times during the interviews. One participant said, “Faith has been very important in navigating my feelings of being an imposter. It’s been critical, because being able to focus on God made me able to see that it’s not about this particular moment, but that this moment is a stepping stone to what I’m looking forward to in the future, what I believe this world can really be. He has control even when I feel like I don’t have control.” Because people of faith view God as steadfast, having an identity in God, rather than one’s work or one’s merit, can bring stability to one’s self-concept. Thus, even in periods where one might feel like an imposter at work, it appears that the discomfort of such thoughts are minimized by the withstanding belief that there is meaning behind one’s current circumstances through God.

Some participants preceded their engagement in the “efficient” coping category with “hedonic disengagement,” a combination of problem avoidance and positive emotional coping, to temporarily distance themselves from the problem before solving it. The focus in this coping strategy is on the avoidance of information related to the problem, and the maintenance of a positive emotional state during a stressful situation. For participants in this sample, this typically took the form of engaging in physical exercise, mindfulness practices, or mentally detaching
from work-inducing imposter-like feelings. For example, in her response to her imposter-like feelings, one participant mentioned that “there have definitely been times where I’ve been like, ‘Oh no, I feel really stressed, I need to take a break away, go for a run, walk away from it for a bit.’” Another said, “I believe in self-care: I will go on walks, step away from my computer, or do a little seven-minute workout to get unstuck because it’s very easy to get stuck.” While a few participants did report the use of these disengaging strategies, they never dwelled there for long. That is, hedonic disengagement behaviors were often an initial reaction to the imposter phenomenon, of which was soon after addressed by integrating more problem solving, rather than problem avoiding, coping strategies into one’s coping response.

Another strategy participants turned to was mistake avoidant efforts. This includes behavioral engagement in things like double-checking one’s work, taking and referencing notes during tasks, and creating check-lists or self-imposed deadlines. While this would normally fall under the coping category of problem solving alone, it did at times become “too much of a good thing” (see next section), as some participants engaged in these behaviors having a “preoccupation with the problem.” The following two quotes exemplify this motivational difference: “I would definitely say the double-checking helped me know the information better because it becomes repetitive. I definitely think that it helped make me not doubt myself constantly by double-checking, even though it was very tedious in the beginning.” Here, the participant engages in a healthy amount of mistake avoidant behaviors to help her gain confidence in her new tasks and responsibilities at work. In turn, this coping strategy was a proactive means to help subside her feelings of imposterism. In contrast, another participant said, “I’m thinking about my job all the time, even when I’m not working. I have a note in my notes app of all the things I think of when I’m not at work, because I don’t want to be seen as letting
something fall through the cracks.” Although a different type of problem avoidant behavior (i.e.,
double-checking vs. taking notes), the motivation behind this strategy draws closer to having a
preoccupation with the imposter phenomenon rather than a proactive engagement with it, the
former being one that involves a high tendency to action in solving the problem and a low
tendency to nurture momentary well-being. Perfectionistic strivings and workaholism would also
fall under this category. While the problem solving tendencies underlying this preoccupation can
help one adapt to their situation, the extent to which this is done, and at the cost of one’s
emotional well-being, brings dysfunctional elements into the nature of this response.

Finally, seeking social support for both instrumental and emotional reasons has been
well-argued to be a source of coping for a number of stressors (Viswesvaran, Sanchez, & Fisher,
1999), and the imposter phenomenon is no different. Indeed, participants received guidance,
feedback, help, and mentorship from an array of people at work (e.g., colleagues, cohort,
supervisor) and in their personal lives (e.g., friends, family, partner). One participant held a close
relationship with her boss and spoke very highly of the role she played in helping her navigate
her imposter-like feelings. “My boss became my mentor. She was so encouraging and any
feelings of ‘imposter’ that I had, they just went away, and I attribute that to her. She made me
feel less like an imposter, especially in a new job. She was one of the best motivators I’ve ever
worked for.” Therefore, it is clear that perceived social support certainly has the capacity to
mitigate the imposter experience and reduce any strain experienced.

**Proposition 5:** A number of strategies can be used in conjunction to cope with the
imposter phenomenon. These strategies are most beneficial when one has a proactive,
problem solving mindset and a healthy concern for maintaining well-being; they can
propel an individual to turn their doubts and feelings of fraudulence to positive terms.
Outcomes of the Challenge Appraisal as “Too Much of a Good Thing”

Appraising the imposter phenomenon as a challenge has been argued thus far to largely result in positive outcomes for the individual, such as a greater engagement in one’s work or an increased motivation to work harder and prove oneself. However, as alluded to in previous discussions, positive outcomes might not be the sole implication of a challenge appraisal. In particular, a common, yet unexpected, theme that emerged from the interviews was this idea of the outcomes associated with how one responds to appraising their imposter-like feelings as a challenge having a theoretically curvilinear effect, or, in other words, having the potential to be “too much of a good thing” (Pierce & Aguinis, 2013). While the specific behavioral responses that are connected to the desire to work harder and be more engaged with work can certainly be beneficial to one’s self-efficacy and performance abilities, among other intrapersonal outcomes, it appears that too much of these behaviors can actually be deleterious for the individual.

The too much of a good thing effect was particularly salient for individuals who employed mistake-avoidant behavioral strategies and increased their time spent on work-related tasks. Participants who were overly concerned with the accuracy of their work would spend a large portion of their working time double-checking their work, which, naturally, slowed down the process of completing tasks in a timely manner. One participant described just this, saying “I am more attentive and will check things more, because if you just check things once, then errors are more likely to slip by; I think it’s a good thing that I do that. But at the same time, I feel like I do things more slowly than what I should be.” Therefore, enabling perfectionistic tendencies or being too attentive to one’s work in response to feeling like an imposter can perhaps be just as problematic for one’s performance self-efficacy as it would be to be completely inattentive to the quality of one’s work. Furthermore, a couple participants noticed that the increased hours they
spent at work had repercussions for their nonwork lives. For the first participant who reported this, she felt that she went into overdrive trying to figure out all the answers to the tasks she was assigned. In her words, “I was working about... like I wouldn’t go home.” She later went on to describe the challenges she faced with her family and partner from being too consumed with work and neglecting to spend time with them. Similarly, another participant was harshly confronted with the negative side of working longer hours to battle his imposter-like feelings: “It was highly compensatory. I really put in a lot of effort. My first marriage was broken over that compensation because of the amount of energy I had to apply to put myself in parity–perceived parity–with all these other people.” Taken together, although this strategy can be useful in helping imposter-like feelings subside, one should not be blind to the serious ramifications that can come from overworking and being too engaged in work (e.g., workaholism; Spence & Robbins, 1992).

Proposition 6: Some behavioral responses to the imposter phenomenon might have hidden costs, such that engaging too much in a strategy that appears to be helping one’s imposter-like feelings subside might actually be harmful for the individual in other areas.

The Nature of Imposterism at Work

Feeling like an imposter at work has been described as a self-concept that reflects an incongruence between one’s perceptions of their own capabilities and others’ (more positive) perceptions of these capabilities (Clance, 1985). Using this conceptualization of the imposter phenomenon, such feelings stand to be more of an inherent characteristic of the individual rather than a product of change or transition. That is, with this rationale, it would be expected that feelings of imposterism are not unique to transitioning to a new position or job, as this personal tendency should persist even in more tenured employees. In more recent work, however, this
early conceptualization has been challenged. Kark, Meister, and Peters (2021) argued that feelings of imposterism can not only surface when a person compares their self-perceptions to those of others, but also when their self-perceptions are compared to perceptions of the role in which they are fulfilling, held by both themselves and others. To simplify, they argue that imposterism should also be defined as “an emergent property of a situation” (p. 6) that arises when an individual perceives that who they are (e.g., attributes, skills) does not meet the standards—either their personal beliefs or what they perceive others’ to believe—of the role they occupy. Therefore, the focal point for this imposterism is based on an incongruence between beliefs about the self and beliefs about the role. Typically, it can be expected that this fit assessment occurs during the early days of starting a new position, albeit any change in the work environment or individual (e.g., gaining more responsibility) can also trigger a fit assessment (Follmer et al., 2018).

Given that the sample for this study was not uniformly composed of organizational newcomers, it allowed for a brief review of the interview data to assess whether these two conceptualizations of the imposter phenomenon came up in discussion. Indeed, this was the case. Regarding the imposter phenomenon as a self-concept, one participant said, “I have weekly feelings of, ‘Oh my gosh, they’re going to find out I’m a fraud.’” Another participant who was reflecting on his career said, “Without a doubt, feeling like an imposter has been present the whole way through. I literally had the imposter syndrome feeling this morning.” Nevertheless, the pervasiveness of these feelings, or the notion that these feelings exist more as a self-concept, should not be conflated with the idea that this is inherently a bad thing. Again, appraisal is a key mechanism linking the imposter phenomenon with its outcomes. As said by one participant who held an imposter self-concept, “It’s not a feeling that’s going to go away. I think this one is hard
coded. But that imposter feeling, it just keeps me going and for me, that’s very motivating. If I didn’t have these feelings, I don’t know where that drive would be.”

Despite these reported instances of the imposter phenomenon acting more as a self-concept than an emergent property, the majority of participants felt that their feelings of imposterism were more temporary and particularly arose when starting a new job or being assigned to do something new at work. This greatly supports Kark and colleagues’ rethinking of the imposter phenomenon as rooted in perceived unmet role expectations. Specifically, the stories of most participants followed the same pattern, such that they felt their imposter-like feelings were most prominent when they first started their new job, which have since subsided, but occasionally resurface at the prompting of something new or unfamiliar. To illustrate, one participant was talking about how she felt like an imposter for the first few months after she started her new role, and even though the intensity of those feelings subsided, she has “felt on and off that way through the time I’ve been in this role.” In particular, she described how a new role assignment that she felt unqualified for made her “feel that imposter syndrome again.” These intermittent feelings of imposterism were common for many participants, but for some, their experience with the imposter phenomenon was terminated after they became acclimated with the job. A participant, well-ingrained into his current position, said, “[The imposter-like feelings] were absolutely present, especially at the beginning, but I’ve been here for awhile, kind of worked my way up the totem pole and developed my confidence in what I do, so [those feelings] aren’t really here anymore.” It follows intuition to suggest that one can temporarily experience imposter-like feelings, yet the imposter phenomenon has previously never been characterized as a recurring or, in some instances, fleeting experience. Findings from this study,
as well as the proposition posed in Kark et al. (2021), suggest that imposterism can arise based on how well an incumbent feels they measure up to the role.

Proposition 7: The imposter phenomenon can be conceptualized in two ways: (1) As a stable self-concept involving the chronic tendency to believe one is ‘faking it’ in front of others; (2) As an emergent property by product of a new role or unfamiliar situation in which one does not feel adequately qualified to fulfill. Context and the research question should drive how the imposter phenomenon is conceptualized.

The Imposter Phenomenon During the COVID-19 Pandemic

At the beginning of each interview, participants were asked to describe whether and how they’ve experienced the imposter phenomenon at work. Participants naturally responded to this question with stories of their most salient imposter-like experiences, pinpointing specific aspects of the experience that led them to feel like an imposter. These aspects were labeled the “focal point” of the imposter experience, which included the granting of more responsibility at work, changing jobs and having minimal knowledge of the new role, comparing oneself to successful others, and operating in an ambiguous or unstructured work environment. While all participants mentioned doubts about their competence or qualifications for their work positions, this merely characterizes the imposter experience. The point at which these thoughts become prevalent is what the focal point represents, and this is often found from some aspect of the work environment. Although certain individuals might be more prone to have imposter-like thoughts, characteristics of one’s work environment might spark these thoughts for some and amplify them for others.

During our conversations, many participants mentioned the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic as a catalyst for feeling like an imposter in their new roles. Specifically,
the pandemic changed the routine operations of many organizations (Ng et al., 2021), and, as a result, became a focal point for the imposter phenomenon in two prevailing ways: exercising hiring freezes from the economic shutdown and transitioning to remote work. First, the hiring market was greatly affected by COVID-19, as many companies implemented hiring freezes to prepare for the financial effects of the pandemic. While the economic implications of this cost control method have been given sufficient attention in the media, less is known about how this decision affected the worker. In this study, we gain a fragment of insight into this experience as it specifically relates to the imposter phenomenon. A participant recounted her thoughts and feelings during her hiring experience, saying “I didn't get a call back or anything [after my interview] because there were hiring freezes for about six months. I beat myself up throughout that time, having a good interview experience, but feeling like ‘Dang, they must have not really liked me.’ It’s a long time to think about things and, you know, doubt yourself. I wasn’t expecting to get called back.” She later went on to describe how these feelings spilled over into her early work experiences once she was offered the job, from what seemed to be the misattribution of her prolonged onboarding to her own capabilities instead of the pandemic. Nevertheless, her story is like many others’ in this study, such that she was able to use her imposter-like feelings as a healthy motivation to “step her game up.”

Furthermore, other participants experienced the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic when work became virtual. For some, the focal point of their imposter experience came from having to be onboarded remotely. This affected the quality of training received. One participant mentioned, “I was in the middle of training, and then the pandemic hit, so training got way different. It was more just like anything that I knew how to do, that’s what I was still doing. I’m still learning all the things that can be a part of my job as I go. It’s a challenge not being in the office and having
to text someone to ask questions.” It’s not surprising for a new employee to feel like an imposter at the onset of a new job, but these feelings can evidently be exacerbated when the training someone receives is disjointed, remote, and unguided. Additionally, remote training had implications for one’s social capital at work. “Onboarding in a pandemic was definitely interesting. It was all virtual. I didn’t see my colleagues in person, so it’s like we don’t really know each other. Everything that my work has to stand for is itself, because they don’t know me as a person. So it’s very personal to me, the stakes are so much higher.” While this participant did describe some upsides to her remote training, such that there were less interruptions and she never felt put on the spot when asked a question, she certainly noticed increased pressure on her quality of task performance. Finally, while transitioning out of an office due to COVID-19 was a clear focal point for many, so was returning to the office. One participant described this by saying, “We are back in action at [the office], but despite all those months of not being in the space and knowing the space, I still have to make decisions regarding the space. I’ve felt the most imposter syndrome that I have ever felt.” The underlying theme in all of these examples pertains to how the pandemic affected one’s confidence in and grasp of the new role. Whether it was from hiring freezes or working remotely, the organizational disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic were clear focal points for the imposter phenomenon, particularly for new employees.

Proposition 8: The “focal point” of the imposter phenomenon is what one’s imposter experience centers around. These imposter-like feelings can come from the employee (e.g., social comparison), the organization (e.g., promotion and restructuring), or even more distally from an act of God (e.g., global pandemic).
Supplementary Analyses

Supplementary analyses were conducted on the quantitative data collected from the initial screening procedure to further informing how the imposter phenomenon relates to other constructs in those samples. The means, standard deviations, and correlations between the variables are presented in Tables 1 and 2 for the UCF and Prolific samples, respectively (Appendix A). Mean reports of the IP in both samples were below the midpoint of the scale to a moderate extent ($M = 2.54$, $SD = .80$ in the UCF sample and $M = 2.73$, $SD = .80$ in the Prolific sample). These findings are relatively consistent with other studies in the imposter phenomenon literature (e.g., Vergauwe et al., 2015 $M = 2.44$, $SD = .78$, Crawford et al., 2016 $M = 2.57$, $SD = .62$; Neureiter et al., 2017 $M = 2.78$, $SD = .65$; Hutchins et al., 2018, $M = 2.81$, $SD = .79$). A closer investigation of one standard deviation above and below these means suggest that the majority of participants had moderate imposter-like feelings ($+/1SD = 1.74-3.34$ in the UCF sample and $+/1SD = 1.93-3.53$ in the Prolific sample). The Clance Imposter Phenomenon Scale (Clance, 1985) suggests that a score between 2 and 4 reflects moderate to frequent experiences with the IP. Thus, the samples used in this study capture an appropriate range of individuals who experience symptoms of imposterism.

Overall, the imposter phenomenon construct significantly correlated with the other variables in the expected direction according to the literature, such that a negative relationship was found with positive constructs and a positive relationship was found with negative constructs. The strongest correlations in the UCF sample were with anxiety ($r = .70$, $p < .05$) and core self-evaluations ($r = -.69$, $p < .05$); the strongest in the Prolific sample were with self-esteem ($r = -.61$, $p < .05$) and neuroticism ($r = .56$, $p < .05$). In contrast, the weakest correlations were with proactive performance ($r = -.15$, n.s.) in the UCF sample and job satisfaction ($r = -.14$, n.s.) in the Prolific sample.
However, the correlation between the IP and job satisfaction in the UCF sample ($r = .29, p < .05$), as well as other performance-related measures in the UCF (e.g., proficient performance, $r = .37, p < .05$) and Prolific (e.g., task performance, $r = .21, p < .05$) samples, suggests that the IP can moderately and negatively affect job attitudes and job performance. Regarding organizational commitment, as measured in the UCF sample, the IP demonstrated a negative correlation with affective commitment ($r = .32, p < .05$) and a positive correlation with continuance commitment ($r = .42, p < .05$). This finding is line with the previous discussion on appraisal. Specifically, an individual is less likely to develop a strong emotional attachment to the organization when the imposter phenomenon is appraised as a hindrance, thus reducing affective commitment (i.e., staying at an organization because you want to or feel a sense of loyalty). Similarly, appraising one’s imposter-like feelings as a threat can increase continuance commitment (i.e., staying at an organization because you have to or feel there are costs to leaving) when an individual believes there are limited opportunities for them to succeed in another position (that is, a person who sees their imposter-like feelings as threat will likely be deterred from changing positions, as doing so is perceived to lead to even higher levels of feeling like an imposter).

It also worth noting that other than work engagement, which had a similar correlation estimate across the two samples, the correlations were consistently stronger in the UCF sample over the Prolific sample (e.g., burnout and the imposter phenomenon, $r = .57, p < .05$ in the UCF sample and $r = .38, p < .05$ in the Prolific sample). This pattern held true even when the same scales were used to measure the constructs. One possible explanation for this observation is that group differences or potential nesting effects are present. For example, tenure has been previously discussed as a key differentiating factor between the two samples. Therefore,
newcomers might experience these outcomes more intensely than more tenured employees due to the additional pressures of having to learn a new job in an unfamiliar environment while also establishing new relationships and managing others’ impressions. Future research could explore this rationale, among others, by statistically investigating how demographic differences might influence the strength of relationships between the imposter phenomenon and related constructs.
DISCUSSION

Qualitative methodology gives researchers unique access to learn about phenomena through the eyes of participants. Previous research and popular press articles consistently regard the imposter phenomenon as a negative experience, one that brings costs to the individual’s well-being and work life. Recent theory (Kark, Meister, & Peters, 2021), however, has challenged this conceptualization, suggesting that a favorable trajectory to the imposter experience might exist. Data from this study support this proposition, illustrating that the IP can indeed have a profile that results in personal and professional development.

Participants described a number of ways in which feeling like an imposter at work strengthened their job performance, psychological well-being, and relationships with others. Their descriptions of the imposter phenomenon as “motivating” and “challenging” provides new insight into the IP, highlighting it as an experience that can be used for individual learning and growth. These perspectives open the door to a deeper understanding of the imposter phenomenon and how such thoughts and feelings can be leveraged to facilitate an effective work experience.

Theoretical Contributions and Future Research Opportunities

The propositions offered in this study make important contributions to theory and provide numerous avenues for future research. First, this research provides new insight into the imposter experience. Whereas previous conceptualizations of the imposter phenomenon have led to both the generalization and assumption that this experience is innately negative, findings from this research suggest otherwise. Specifically, for some individuals, the imposter experience might actually be beneficial to their growth and development. While this is certainly not the case for all individuals who identify with the IP (Leonhardt et al., 2017), it is clear from this research that, in
some circumstances, the imposter phenomenon can give rise to positive outcomes. The next important question to ask is, *what are those circumstances?*

In this study, cognitive appraisal appeared to play a key role in disrupting the negative thought patterns of the IP, as participants who described their experiences as challenging and motivating also reported generative, positive outcomes. Future research should explore other moderating and mediating conditions under which the imposter phenomenon might be experienced more positively. For example, goal-orientation (Dweck & Leggett, 1988) is one individual difference construct worth exploring. When it comes to the IP, an individual with a mastery orientation (i.e., focused on learning and improving abilities) should experience more positive outcomes than an individual with a performance-approach (i.e., demonstrating abilities successfully to get a reward) or performance-avoidance (i.e., demonstrating abilities successfully to avoid a punishment) orientation because they are driven by the desire for self-improvement rather than the fear of potentially being exposed from having to showcase their abilities. Therefore, the IP might propel a mastery-oriented individual to improve upon their perceived shortcomings, whereas the same thoughts for an individual with a performance-approach or performance-avoidance orientation might exacerbate existing perceptions of being undeserving and unable to demonstrate their abilities successfully.

Similarly, organization-level constructs like psychological safety (Edmondson & Lei, 2014) and mastery work climate (Ames, 1992) should also be considered. In these contextual conditions, individuals with imposter-like thoughts and feelings are encouraged to cooperate and support one another, emphasizing evaluations on the basis of learning and development, rather than normative comparison and competition (i.e., performance climate; Ntoumanis & Biddle,
These work environments should therefore serve as fruitful grounds for positive outcomes to burgeon.

When studying the imposter phenomenon in this manner, it is also worth considering the base rate of individuals who appraise their imposter-like thoughts and feelings as a challenge. That is, of the people with higher reports of the IP, how many actually experience it positively? In this study, 29% of participants reported imposter-like feelings in the UCF sample (i.e., were above the midpoint of the scale), and 59% of those individuals indicated a positive imposter experience (according to the selection criteria). Thus, approximately 17% of the overall sample experienced IP positively. In the Prolific sample, 38% of participants reported imposter-like feelings, 25% of whom indicated a positive imposter experience. Thus, around 9.5% of the overall Prolific sample experienced IP positively. This smaller proportion of individuals in the Prolific sample can be explained, in part, due to the more stringent selection criteria used to identify eligible participants. Specifically, participants in the UCF sample had to satisfy the midpoint criterion for at least eight of the nine measures, whereas participants in the Prolific sample had to satisfy this same criterion for ten of the twelve measures. Additionally, base rates in the study by Leonhardt et al. (2017) suggest that about 50% of participants reported imposter-like feelings, and 49-54% of those individuals did not exhibit the negatively associated outcomes, leading to the conclusion that around 25% of their sample reported neutral outcomes of the IP. It should be noted, however, that the scale score used to determine participant inclusion in their analyses was based on the sample median of 2.08 on a five-point scale, whereas the present study relied on a stricter cut-off value of 3.00 based on the scale midpoint. Clance (1985) suggests that a scale score greater than 2.05 reflects someone who experiences symptoms of imposterism. Thus, future researchers should use this information to guide how they
operationalize the IP in designs that focus exclusively on individuals who demonstrate imposter-like feelings, particularly as a preemptive effort to obtain an adequate sample size. Nevertheless, these descriptive statistics not only support the proposition that a positive side to the imposter phenomenon exists, but also suggest that such experience might be more prevalent among so-called imposters than what was previously expected.

This research also contributes to theory by providing greater insight as to when and how imposter-like feelings can occur. Previously, the imposter phenomenon has been characterized as a stable self-concept, reflecting the recurring comparisons of one’s self-perceptions with others’ (more positive) perceptions. This characterization dates back to Clance (1985), who described it as a “chronic tendency” to have feelings of fraudulence. Recently, however, Kark and colleagues (2021) redefined the imposter phenomenon by proposing it as a socially triggered experience, one that occurs within a specific role, at a specific point in time. They define this characterization as a comparison between oneself (“who am I and what am I capable of”) and the expectations of the role in which they occupy (“who do others need me to be within a specific role, and what do they expect me to do;” p. 7, Kark et al., 2021). Findings from this study suggest that these two characterizations of the IP are not mutually exclusive. In some instances, participants described the weekly, if not daily, encounters they have had with feeling like an imposter, suggesting that their experiences align more with having an imposter self-concept. In other instances, participants described their imposter-like feelings as being triggered by their environment (e.g., starting a new role, COVID-19 disruptions) and lasting for a comparatively shorter amount of time, suggesting that their experience with the IP is more temporary and circumstantial. Taken together, this new characterization of the IP proposed by Kark et al. (2021) does not appear to be new wine in old wineskins, as the two characterizations have clear conceptual distinctions.
Scholars should pay close attention to the research questions being asked and the context in which the study will take place to guide their selection of the most suitable characterization of the imposter phenomenon to use in their research.

Given that the concept of a socially-driven imposter experience is nascent, future research could contribute to providing a better understanding of what might make an individual more or less susceptible to experience the IP in this manner; this could include individual (e.g., role calling, experience), relational (e.g., mentors, role models), or organizational (e.g., climate, human resource management practices) factors. In addition to these investigations of antecedents and moderators, future research could also explore outcomes of the IP as both a self-concept and a socially-triggered experience, comparing the relative strength and occurrence of outcomes across these two characterizations. Together, these research efforts would provide clarity as to whether the trait-like and state-like characterizations of the imposter phenomenon demonstrate unique relationships with the constructs that have been generally associated with this experience. From this research and past theorizing (Kark et al., 2021), a conceptual distinction is clear, but whether a functional and statistical distinction exists remains unknown.

A third contribution of this research is the validation of stress responses as articulated by Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) transactional theory of stress. In particular, Lazarus and Folkman argue for primary appraisal and secondary appraisal as the first responses to perceived stressors. Primary appraisal occurs when a stressor is judged as relevant to one’s well-being. In this study, participants first appraised their imposter-like feelings as either challenging, hindering, or threatening (or some combination of the three, as will be discussed later) to their well-being. When appraised as a challenge, the imposter experience served as an opportunity for the individual to learn and grow in the areas they perceived to be lacking. That is, feelings of doubt
about one’s abilities, as well as the fear of potentially being exposed, motivated individuals to engage in proactive work behaviors and deepen relational connections for support. In instances where the IP was appraised as a hindrance, the experience was described as a restriction on the individual’s capabilities and quality of work performance. Here, these same doubts and fears obstructed work productivity, either through tendencies for procrastination from feeling overwhelmed or tendencies for perfectionism from not wanting to fail (Whitman & Shanine, 2012), both leaving individuals stressed and behind in their work. Finally, when the imposter phenomenon was appraised as a threat, the individual felt insecure about their potential to be successful in future endeavors (e.g., applying for/accepting a new position). Appraising these doubts and fears as a threat typically led to some form of self-handicapping behaviors performed to protect the individual’s self-esteem from damage (Cowman & Ferrari, 2002).

However, appraisals of the imposter phenomenon were not limited to a singular appraisal (that is, being appraised as solely challenging, hindering, or threatening by the same individual). For example, some people re-appraised their imposter-like feelings, such that they saw the IP as a hindrance on some occasions and a challenge on others. This is consistent with existing theory, which suggests that appraisal is dynamic and can fluctuate daily based on new situations and reconsiderations of one’s current circumstances (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Searle & Auton, 2015). Participants in this study also described instances where they held multiple appraisals of the IP in a given moment. To these individuals, the imposter phenomenon was wrestled with as a double-edged sword, a motivator in some ways but an obstruction in others. Again, this is consistent with existing theory, suggesting that a single event can be seen as particularly challenging and hindering or threatening (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).
While previous research explicitly argues against classifying stressors \textit{a priori} (Horan et al., 2020) on the logic that what is hindering for some might be seen as challenging for others, the extent to which this argument is empirically supported mostly rests on between-person (i.e., one sees the stressor as challenging, whereas another sees the same stressor as threatening) and within-person (i.e., some days the stressor is seen as challenging, whereas other days it is seen as threatening) variations in appraisal. Findings from this study suggest that simultaneous appraisals (i.e., a single stressor is seen as having both positive and negative elements by the same person) should also be considered and investigated. Existing work suggests there are unique outcomes associated with each type of appraisal, both within- and between-persons (Searle & Auton, 2015; Tuckey et al. 2015). Future research should explore the strength of outcomes associated with simultaneous appraisals and incorporate this form of appraisal into existing models. Additionally, the stress appraisal literature would benefit from a better understanding of the temporal dynamics underlying between-person, within-person, and simultaneous appraisals—how they emerge, fluctuate, and dissolve—in relation to both the IP and other stress events more generally.

Along with primary appraisals, secondary appraisal occurs when the individual assesses whether anything can be done about the stressor and its effects (e.g., mitigate, tolerate, resolve). In this study, participants asked themselves reflective questions like, “Can I do this?” or “Is this a valid feeling?” or “What can I change about myself?” as they considered how they were going to react to their imposter-like feelings. The specific strategies they employed to cope with the IP will be discussed in a later section. Overall, however, findings from this research validate the stress responses outlined in the transactional theory of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and further propagate the need for future research on simultaneous stress appraisals.
Relatedly, a fourth contribution of this research was the intentional effort made to investigate the role of threat appraisal independently from hindrance appraisal. Previous models have blended the unique attributes of hindrance and threat appraisals into one generically negative appraisal (i.e., hindrance; Cavanaugh et al., 2000). However, there is more nuance that can be gained from teasing the appraisals out into two distinct forms, both theoretically (Horan et al., 2020) and statistically (Tuckey et al., 2015). As described earlier, appraising the imposter phenomenon as a hindrance and a threat looked quite different, with the former being an obstruction to work productivity and the latter being a deterrent to future achievement. The subtleties of these types of appraisal might have gone undetected if they were not intentionally investigated. Future research should directly measure appraisal using the quantitative methods outlined by Webster et al., (2011) and Searle & Auton (2015) to assess whether these descriptive differentiations among IP appraisals are statistically identifiable as well.

A fifth contribution of this research is the early lead on a potential “too much of a good thing” effect when the IP is appraised as a challenge. The too much of a good thing effect suggests that higher levels of otherwise beneficial antecedents may lead to inadvertent and undesired outcomes (Pierce & Aguinis, 2013). For example, a curvilinear relationships exists between conscientiousness and job performance, where higher levels of conscientiousness can result in poor performance ratings from having paralysis of sorts due to an overconcern with perfection (Carter, Dalal, Boyce, O’Connell, Kung, & Delgado, 2014). In this study, it was first proposed and found that the imposter phenomenon can indeed be an antecedent that leads to positive outcomes, particularly when such feelings are appraised as a challenge. Then it was revealed that while the general tendency for individuals who appraised the IP as a challenge was to engage in proactive work behaviors, the extent to which these behaviors engendered positive
effects was dependent on how aggressively the individual pursued them. That is, individuals who were overcompensating in their pursuit of personal growth were more likely to report hindrance outcomes (e.g., slower work pace, strained relationships). Thus, the extent to which the IP can be used as a motivational tool to better oneself might be dependent on how extreme the individual responds to the challenge. Cavanaugh and colleagues (1998) theorized a curvilinear relationship where challenge stressors can become hindrance stressors at a certain point of demand intensity. This offers support for the too much of a good thing effect in application with the imposter phenomenon as a challenge experience and should therefore be empirically investigated in future research. Similarly, a comparison of the strength of relationships between challenge appraisals of the IP and hindrance/threat appraisals of the IP with positive and negative outcomes, respectively, could also be investigated to better understand how much influence imposter-like feelings have on individual well-being and job performance.

Finally, an unexpected, and rather interesting, contribution of this research was the emergence of coping responses to the imposter phenomenon. Secondary appraisal has been theorized to determine coping strategies (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987), such that assessing that little can be done to resolve a situation will result in emotion-focused coping, while assessing a situation can be managed will result in problem-focused coping. Stanislawski (2019) expanded upon Lazarus and Folkman’s dichotomous model of coping by suggesting that people are often simultaneously tasked with addressing a problem and controlling their emotions. The coping circumplex model (CMM) was developed as a framework that allows for singular and dual uses of problem- and emotion-focused coping. The CCM divides problem-focused coping into approach-avoidance dimensions (Roth & Cohen, 1986) and emotion-focused coping into equilibrium-disequilibrium dimensions (Gol & Cook, 2004), organizing dual uses of these
bipolar dimensions into subcategories (i.e., efficient coping (P+, E+), preoccupation with the problem (P+, E-), helplessness (P-, E-), and hedonic disengagement (P-, E+); Stanislawski, 2019).

In this study, participants largely responded to the imposter phenomenon by employing coping methods that aligned with the efficient style of coping, characterized by problem solving and positive emotional coping strategies (e.g., introspection, reframing). This method was most employed in conjunction with those who described their imposter-like feelings as a challenge. That is, individuals who held a challenge appraisal of the imposter phenomenon often undertook efforts to understand their thoughts and feelings and engage in positive reframing so that they could use the IP as an opportunity for learning and development. Sometimes this method was preceded by hedonic disengagement, which is characterized by problem avoidance and positive emotional coping. This method predominantly took the form of detachment from work (e.g., mindfulness practices, exercise) in an effort to restore one’s momentary well-being from the stress caused by the IP. Nevertheless, it was common for problem solving strategies to be employed after this period of disengagement.

Participants also described mistake avoidant efforts (e.g., proofing work, referencing notes) as a method for coping with their imposter-like feelings. Motivational differences behind these efforts, however, determine whether this strategy is more aligned with problem-solving coping alone or a combination of problem solving and negative emotional coping, which is labeled as a “preoccupation with the problem” in the CCM. While a healthy amount of mistake avoidant efforts is beneficial to combat the doubts associated with the imposter phenomenon, too much of these behaviors can come at the cost of emotional well-being. In essence, this highlights
the too much of a good thing effect described earlier, where seemingly helpful behaviors can lead to deleterious outcomes when motivation is driven by fear rather than learning.

Finally, support seeking, which does not fit into the CCM, was identified as a valuable coping strategy. Many sources of support were described, including supervisors, colleagues, friends, and family. Through their conversations with other people, participants in this study felt supported as they navigated their imposter-like feelings, encouraged from the guidance that was offered to them, and comforted in their discovery that many others are also feeling like an imposter in their current circumstances. In turn, these relationships and exchanges helped diminish feelings of imposterism. This method of coping is in line with a call made earlier for future research that considers which conditions, including relational conditions, might make an individual more or less susceptible to feelings of imposterism at work.

There are several additional directions for future research suggested by this study. One relates to the need for a broader conceptualization of coping as it relates to the imposter phenomenon. The strategies identified in this study that were used to cope with the imposter phenomenon are limited, as the sample was intentionally skewed toward those who indicated a more positive imposter experience. Therefore, it is unlikely that these same strategies are employed by individuals who appraise their imposter-like feelings as a hindrance or threat. Indeed, a recent study by Hutchins and colleagues (2018) explored the use of avoidant coping strategies in response to the imposter-like feelings on emotional exhaustion and reduced job satisfaction. This research is consistent with the proposition that coping strategies and outcomes are dependent on how the IP is appraised, such that challenge appraisals are linked with active coping approaches and more positive outcomes while hindrance and threat appraisals are linked with avoidant coping approaches and more negative outcomes. The larger imposter phenomenon
literature would benefit from a deeper integration of coping and the IP to unpack which coping styles are most prevalent among the different imposter experiences. Through this exploratory work, the IP literature would gain a more holistic understanding of the nomological network between the imposter phenomenon, cognitive appraisal, coping, and its related outcomes (Appendix B).

Another avenue for future research is longitudinal investigations of how experience with the IP influences coping. There are a number of questions that could be asked about how one’s previous experiences with the IP interact with their current efforts to cope with its recurrence: In what ways might coping strategies be influenced when an individual has had repeated encounters with the IP? Do these individuals have better knowledge of the most effective coping strategies compared to early experiencers of the IP? Similarly, how much time does it comparatively take for their imposter-like thoughts to subside? Does the effectiveness of these coping strategies diminish when cognitive awareness and past experiences are accounted for? Answers to these questions affords a better understanding of how the within-person imposter experience might change over time. This can be further partitioned into how these questions might unfold differentially among those who experience the IP from having an imposter self-concept and those that repeatedly experience such feelings from environmental triggers.

Finally, a further exploration of the ‘challenging’ imposter experience would not only be fruitful for deepening our understanding of this nascent take on the imposter phenomenon, but could greatly inform the development of organizational interventions aimed at teaching employees how to identify and use their imposter-like feelings to excel at work as well. Specifically, these interventions would target the psychological process of cognitive appraisal to alter the way in which people think about the IP. Bringing science to practice in this manner would certainly be a
proactive step forward in helping individuals learn about the positive outcomes that can come from feeling like an imposter, as well as the large number of strategies that exist to help them internalize this perspective.

**Limitations of the Research**

Several limitations of this study should be considered. First, it can be quite challenging to accurately assess cognitive appraisals, given that appraisals should be measured as close to the time at when they occurred (Cavanaugh et al., 2000; Webster et al., 2011; Searle & Auton, 2015). Early efforts have been made to develop psychometrically valid scales that measure cognitive appraisals, particularly for use in research designs that are intended to analyze momentary experiences (e.g., vignettes, diary survey; Searle & Auton, 2015). However, the nature of this research was predominantly retrospective, which creates more opportunity for measurement bias (e.g., memory bias) to contaminate the recounts of participant experiences with the imposter phenomenon. Qualitative interviews were intentionally selected given the exploratory nature of this research, as well as the nascent of research in this area. Yet, the strength with which conclusions can be drawn from this research about cognitive appraisal influencing how the IP is experienced is somewhat limited and should be empirically tested in future, more well-suited research designs. Nevertheless, this research lays a strong foundation for future investigations on the positive imposter experience.

Second, the sampling strategy used in this study limits the extent to which findings from this research can be characterized as unique to those who report higher levels of imposter-like feelings, yet do not experience the expected outcomes. While there does appear to be variability in how the imposter phenomenon is experienced, this inference is limited by the absence of
comparison groups (e.g., those who experience the IP as it has been traditionally studied, those who feel less like imposters altogether). Future research should demonstrate that the imposter phenomenon can be differentially experienced by avoiding restriction of the IP range, as well as restriction of other constructs measured in the study, and more rigorously testing this variation through statistical path models.

A third limitation of this research pertains to the use of qualitative methodology in general. While there are certainly strengths of qualitative research over other approaches, such as the opportunity to explore the subtleties of phenomena in detail and depth (Anderson, 2010), the limitations of this methodology should not go unrecognized. Qualitative research is particularly susceptible to the personal biases and idiosyncrasies of the researcher and the coding team. Although efforts were made to improve assessment accuracy (e.g., interview protocol, detailed codebook, frame-of-reference training), the vulnerability of qualitative research to this type of measurement error will never be fully eliminated when the researcher is the primary instrument. Additionally, as has been previously discussed, the rigor of qualitative research is difficult to maintain and demonstrate, and this study is no exception. Qualitative methodology served its purpose for the exploratory work of this research. Now, future endeavors should build upon these findings by selecting appropriate research designs, incorporating quantitative methodology, and applying statistical techniques to more precisely refine the propositions offered in this study.

**Practical Implications**

Keeping in mind these limitations, results from this study can guide employees, and managers of these employees, in navigating the imposter phenomenon at work. Organizational newcomers described feelings of imposterism leading up to and during the first few months of
starting a new position. However, many used these feelings as an opportunity to learn more about their new organization and the role requirements they would be expected to take on. Employees can study the organization—for example, the company structure, the mission statement, and the organization’s policies and procedures—before onboarding to turn periods of discomfort from imposter-like thoughts and feelings into an opportunity for growth and learning. Similarly, managers ought to be aware that feelings of imposterism are quite prevalent during periods of transition and should therefore equip newcomers with adequate training and supplementary resources to help facilitate a smooth acclimation into their new work environment. Efforts can also be taken to systematically confront the IP within the organization by raising awareness of its existence and offering strategies to counter its negative effects.

For individuals facing the imposter phenomenon generally (that is, not necessarily newcomers to the organization), a number of strategies were identified to help subside these feelings and, most importantly, learn from them. Such individuals would benefit from actively engaging in reframing their doubts and fears as opportunities for personal and professional development and engaging in proactive work behaviors that assist in confidence building (e.g., taking notes, making quick-reference sheets). Importantly, these efforts should ultimately be driven by the desire to better oneself rather than fearing failure or exposure. A balance should be struck in how aggressively these strategies are pursued, and an appropriate accountability test for this can simply be performed by checking one’s motives. If motivated by the desire for learning, then the IP should be experienced positively; if motivated by the fear of failure, then the IP will likely be experienced negatively.

Finally, managers can learn to recognize when employees might be experiencing imposter-like feelings, albeit such feelings can be easily concealed, overlooked, and hard to
detect (Kark et al., 2021). Although high-achieving individuals often require little oversight, these individuals would benefit from frequent well-being check-ins, particularly due to the high standards they hold for themselves. Through developmental opportunities, such as mentoring, managers can help these individuals identify and navigate their feelings of fraudulence by focusing on the positive outcomes that may result from efforts to resolve and learn from their imposter-like thoughts and feelings (e.g., skill acquisition). Managers can also bolster employees’ confidence in their abilities by providing empowering and developmental feedback on tasks that specifically target competency areas they feel weak in. Additionally, if applicable, managers who have experienced the IP for themselves would be remiss not to pass on that information, sharing with the employees how they appraise and navigate imposter-like feelings when they arise. Demonstrating this kind of empathy will help employees learn that they are not alone in their experience of the imposter phenomenon, deepening their beliefs that they, too, can take control of the imposter-like feelings.
CONCLUSION

This qualitative study provides new insights into how employees experience the imposter phenomenon. The literature has traditionally conveyed the IP as a negative self-concept with deleterious costs for the individual experiencing it. However, findings from this study, in conjunction with recent theorizing (Kark et al., 2021), suggest that the IP can be socially triggered and experienced in a manner that promotes personal and professional development. Specifically, when the imposter phenomenon is appraised as a challenge, or an opportunity for learning and growth, it provides the necessary motivation for these feelings of doubt to be used for self-improvement. Mike Cannon-Brookes, entrepreneur and TED speaker, articulated his positive experience with the imposter phenomenon best: “It’s ok to be out of your depth sometimes...so long as you don’t freeze, so long as you harness the situation...and turn it into a force for good.”
APPENDIX A: CORRELATION TABLES
**Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among Variables (UCF Sample)**

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*Note. Cronbach's alpha coefficients are listed in diagonal.

*p < .05
### Table 2: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among Variables (Prolific Sample)

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**Note.** Cronbach's alpha coefficients are listed in diagonal.

*p < .05
Figure 1: Interrelationships of the Imposter Phenomenon

Individual Factors
(e.g., Neuroriticism, Self-Criticism, Trait Anxiety)

Environmental Factors
(e.g., Starting a New Role, Remote Onboarding)

Imposter Phenomenon

Challenge Appraisal

Hindrance Appraisal

Threat Appraisal

Opportunity for Self-Improvement
Increased Motivation
Proactive Work Behaviors

Obstruction to Performance Quality
Exhaustion and Strain
Procrastination/Perfectionism

Deterrent to Future Achievement
Anxiety
Avoidance Behaviors/Self-Handicapping

P5: Proactive Problem Solving (P+), Efficiency (P+, E+), and Hedonic Disengagement (P-, E+)

Maladaptive Coping Strategies (Future Research Directions)

Coping Strategies

P7/P8

P4

P6
APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW GUIDE
To Read Aloud: Thank you for agreeing to participate in my Master’s thesis project.

- This conversation will be confidential. Your name will be anonymous and not used in research. Have you read the consent form, and do you have any questions?
- With your permission, I am going to record the interview (prefer audio/video?) You may request to end the interview at any time. Do you have any last questions before we begin?

Interview Questions

[1] You indicated on the survey that you started a new job about [9 months] ago. What does your job involve (what is it that you do)?

  - How has that been going for you? What do you like / dislike about it?
  - What are your main responsibilities? What made you interested in the field?

[2] A big interest for us in this research is to better understand the imposter phenomenon. Is this something you’ve heard of or something you’re familiar with?

  - DESCRIPTION: It’s generally feeling like you may not be qualified for this position and got there by luck or maybe that you even fooled others into believing your skill or competence is greater than it actually is.

  - It’s a pretty common experience for people in new jobs or new positions—I definitely have felt this way being a new graduate student, my advisor even talks about how he felt that way starting a job as a professor. So, the purpose of this research is to understand how these feelings are experienced.
[3] Can you describe what it was like when you transitioned to your new job and how these imposter-like feelings were perhaps present during this time?

- Would you say these feelings are/were pretty pervasive in your work? Would you mind telling me more about that?

[4] Thinking about (the experience identified in Q3), how would you say these feelings influenced your experience at work? Your ability to perform the job?

- Do you feel like these feelings were something that held you back or something that pushed you to be better?

- [POSITIVE] Can you describe the positive effects this experience had on you? What did you do with those feelings to translate them into something positive?
  - How did this experience help you reach your full potential at work?
  - How did this experience make you feel extra motivated about your job?

- [NEGATIVE] Can you describe the negative effects this experience had on you?
  - How did this experience hurt you from reaching your full potential at work?
  - Did you feel stressed, anxious, or less satisfied with your job?

[5] When you feel these feelings of incompetence or not being qualified at your job, how do you manage situations when you feel this way, but have no choice but to persevere?

- What would you say was the overall impact this experience had on your work? How about your personal development or your career as a whole?

[6] Is there anything else you would like to tell me about this experience, your job, or the study in general?
APPENDIX D: UCF MEASURES
Imposter Phenomenon (Clance, 1985)

1. I have often succeeded on a test or task even though I was afraid that I would not do well before I undertook the task.

2. I can give the impression that I’m more competent than I really am.

3. I avoid evaluations if possible and have a dread of others evaluating me.

4. When people praise me for something I’ve accomplished, I’m afraid I won’t be able to live up to their expectations in the future.

5. I sometimes think I obtained my present position or gained by present success because I happened to be in the right place at the right time or knew the right people.

6. I’m afraid people important to me may find out that I’m not as capable as they think I am.

7. I tend to remember the incidents in which I have not done my best more than those times I have done my best.

8. I rarely do a project or task as well as I’d like to do it.

9. Sometimes I feel or believe that my success in my life or in my job has been the result of some kind of error.

10. It’s hard for me to accept compliments or praise about my intelligence or accomplishments.

11. At times, I feel my success has been due to some kind of luck.

12. I’m disappointed at times in my present accomplishments and think I should have accomplished much more.

13. Sometimes I’m afraid others will discover how much knowledge or ability I really lack.
14. I’m often afraid that I may fail at a new assignment or undertaking even though I generally do well at what I attempt.

15. When I’ve succeeded at something and received recognition for my accomplishments, I have doubts that I can keep repeating that success.

16. If I receive a great deal of praise and recognition for something I’ve accomplished, I tend to discount the importance of what I’ve done.

17. I often compare my ability to those around me and think they may be more intelligent than I am.

18. I often worry about not succeeding with a project or examination, even though others around me have considerable confidence that I will do well.

19. If I’m going to receive a promotion or gain recognition of some kind, I hesitate to tell others until it is an accomplished fact.

20. I feel bad and discouraged if I’m not “the best” or at least “very special” in situations that involve achievement.

**Burnout (Kristensen, Biarritz, Villadsen, & Christensen, 2005)**

1. Do you feel worn out at the end of the working day?

2. Are you exhausted in the morning at the thought of another day at work?

3. Do you feel that every working hour is tiring for you?

4. Do you have enough energy for family and friends during leisure time? (R)

5. Is your work emotionally exhausting?

6. Does your work frustrate you?

7. Do you feel burnt out because of your work?
Anxiety (Spitzer, Kroenke, Williams, & Lowe, 2006)

Instructions: Over the last two weeks, how often have you been bothered by the following problems?

1. Feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge?
2. Not being able to stop or control worrying?
3. Worrying too much about different things?
4. Trouble relaxing?
5. Being so restless that it is hard to sit still?
6. Becoming easily annoyed or irritable?
7. Feeling afraid as if something awful might happen?

Depression (Kroenke, Spitzer, & Williams, 2001)

Instructions: Over the last two weeks, how often have you been bothered by the following problems?

1. Little interest or pleasure in doing things?
2. Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless?
3. Trouble falling or staying asleep, or sleeping too much?
4. Feeling tired or having little energy?
5. Poor appetite or overeating?
6. Feeling bad about yourself — or that you are a failure or have let yourself or your family down?
7. Moving or speaking so slowly that other people could have noticed? Or the opposite, being so fidgety or restless that you have been moving around a lot more than usual?
8. Thoughts that you would be better off dead or hurting yourself?
Job Satisfaction (Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins, & Klesh, 1979)

1. All in all, I am satisfied with my job.
2. In general, I don’t like my job. (R)
3. In general, I like working here.

Work Engagement (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006)

1. At my work, I feel bursting with energy.
2. At my job, I feel strong and vigorous.
3. I am enthusiastic about my job.
4. My job inspires me.
5. When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work.
6. I feel happy when I am working intensely.
7. I am proud of the work that I do.
8. I am immersed in my work.
9. I get carried away when I am working.

Work Role Performance (Griffin, Neal, & Parker, 2007)

Individual Task Proficiency

1. Carried out the core parts of your job well?
2. Completed your core tasks well using the standard procedures?
3. Ensured your tasks were completed properly?

Individual Task Adaptivity

4. Adapted well to changes in core tasks?
5. Coped with changes to the way you have to do your core tasks?
6. Learned new skills to help you adapt to changes in your core tasks?
**Individual Task Proactivity**

7. Initiated better ways of doing your core tasks?

8. Come up with ideas to improve the way in which your core tasks are done?

9. Made changes to the way your core tasks are done?

**Organizational Commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1997)**

**Affective Commitment**

1. I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career in this organization.

2. I really feel as if this organization’s problems are my own.

3. I do not feel like ‘part of the family’ at this organization. (R)

4. I do not feel ‘emotionally attached’ to this organization. (R)

5. This organization has a great deal of personal meaning for me.

6. I do not feel a ‘strong’ sense of belonging to this organization. (R)

**Continuance Commitment**

1. It would be very hard for me to leave my job at this organization right now even if I wanted to.

2. Too much of my life would be disrupted if I leave my organization.

3. Right now, staying with my job at this organization is a matter of necessity as much as desire.

4. I believe I have too few options to consider leaving this organization.

5. One of the few negative consequences of leaving my job at this organization would be the scarcity of available alternatives elsewhere.

6. One of the major reasons I continue to work for this organization is that leaving would require considerable personal sacrifice.
Core Self-Evaluations (Judge, Erez, Bono, & Thoresen, 2003)

1. I am confident I get the success I deserve in life.

2. Sometimes I feel depressed. (R)

3. When I try, I generally succeed.

4. Sometimes when I fail I feel worthless. (R)

5. I complete tasks successfully.

6. Sometimes I do not feel in control of my work. (R)

7. Overall, I am satisfied with myself.

8. I am filled with doubts about my competence. (R)

9. I determine what will happen in my life.

10. I do not feel in control of my success in my career. (R)

11. I am capable of coping with most of my problems.

12. There are times when things look pretty bleak and hopeless to me. (R)
APPENDIX E: PROLIFIC MEASURES
**Neuroticism (Goldberg, 1999)**

1. Am relaxed most of the time. (R)
2. Seldom feel blue. (R)
3. Get stressed out easily.
4. Worry about things.
5. Am easily disturbed.
7. Change my mood a lot.
8. Have frequent mood swings.
10. Often feel blue.

**Self-Esteem (Rosenberg, 1965)**

1. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.
2. At times I think I am no good at all. (R)
3. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.
4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.
5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of. (R)
6. I certainly feel useless at times. (R)
7. I feel that I’m a person of worth, or at least on an equal plane with others. (R)
8. I wish I could have more respect for myself. (R)
9. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure. (R)
10. I take a positive attitude toward myself.

**Negative Affect (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988)**
1. Scared
2. Afraid
3. Upset
4. Distressed
5. Jittery
6. Nervous
7. Ashamed
8. Guilty
9. Irritable
10. Hostile

**Workplace Anxiety** (McCarthy, Trougakos, & Cheng, 2016)

1. I am overwhelmed by thoughts of doing poorly at work.
2. I worry that my work performance will be lower than that of others at work.
3. I feel nervous and apprehensive about not being able to meet performance targets.
4. I worry about not receiving a positive job performance evaluation.
5. I often feel anxious that I will not be able to perform my job duties in the time allotted.
6. I worry about whether others consider me to be a good employee for the job.
7. I worry that I will not be able to successfully manage the demands of my job.
8. Even when I try as hard as I can, I still worry about whether my job performance will be good enough.

**Occupational Stress** (Motowidlo, Packard, & Manning, 1986)

1. I feel a great deal of stress because of my job.
2. Very few stressful things happen to me at work. (R)
3. My job is extremely stressful.
4. I almost never feel stressed at work. (R)

Well-Being (Smith, Dalen, Wiggins, Tooley, Christopher, & Bernard, 2008)

1. I have felt cheerful and in good spirits.
2. I have felt calm and relaxed.
3. I have felt active and vigorous.
4. I woke up feeling fresh and rested.
5. My daily life has been filled with things that interest me.

Task Performance (Williams & Anderson, 1991)

1. I adequately complete my assigned duties at work.
2. I perform all the tasks that are expected of me at work.
3. I meet the formal requirements of my job.
4. I neglect aspects of the job I am obligated to perform. (R)
APPENDIX F: IRB APPROVAL LETTER
EXEMPTION DETERMINATION

February 5, 2021

Dear Emily Macias:

On 2/5/2021, the IRB determined the following submission to be human subjects research that is exempt from regulation:

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<td>Investigator:</td>
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This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made, and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please submit a modification request to the IRB. Guidance on submitting Modifications and Administrative Check-in are detailed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103), which can be found by navigating to the IRB Library within the IRB system. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request so that IRB records will be accurate.

If you have any questions, please contact the UCF IRB at 407-823-2901 or irb@ucf.edu. Please include your project title and IRB number in all correspondence with this office.

Sincerely,

Katie Kilgore
Designated Reviewer
REFERENCES


Van den Broeck, A., De Cuyper, N., De Witte, H., & Vansteenkiste, M. (2010). Not all job demands are equal: Differentiating job hindrances and job challenges in the Job


