

# Racial Identity, Self-Esteem, and the Impostor Phenomenon Among African American College Students

Journal of Black Psychology

2017, Vol. 43(4) 345–357

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DOI: 10.1177/0095798416648787

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## Abstract

The Impostor Phenomenon (IP) is marked by an individual's persistent perception of incompetency despite contrary evidence. The presence of IP has been found to negatively affect many college students, but literature on IP among African American college students, specifically, is limited. Previous literature has emphasized a positive association between racial identity and self-esteem for African Americans, and an inverse association between self-esteem and IP among non-African American samples. However, few studies have examined these variables in African American undergraduate samples.

**Objectives:** The current study examined the relationships between racial identity, self-esteem, and IP among African American undergraduate students. It was hypothesized that self-esteem would mediate the relationship between racial identity and IP. **Method:** The participants were 112 (74% female) self-identified African American undergraduate students who completed an online survey. **Results:** Mediation testing via bootstrapping revealed support for the hypothesis—self-esteem mediated the relationship between racial identity and IP. **Conclusion:** University initiatives should focus on creating inclusive environments that foster racial identity development and self-esteem for African Americans to reduce experiences of IP.

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**Keywords**

academic achievement, achievement gap, college students, MIBI, racial identity

With only half of all enrolled African American college students persisting to graduation (Aud et al., 2010), African Americans are lagging behind their White peers substantially in undergraduate degree attainment (Aud et al., 2010; M. S. Thompson, Gorin, Obeidat, & Chen, 2006). The Impostor Phenomenon (IP) is one construct that may be affecting African American student degree attainment due to its association with poor psychological well-being. IP is marked by an individual's persistent internal experience that they are incapable or incompetent, despite contrary evidence (Clance & Imes, 1978). IP has been associated with negative behavioral and psychological outcomes such as diminished self-esteem, perfectionism, and anxiety (Cozzarelli & Major, 1990; Ross & Krukowski, 2003; Sonnak & Towell, 2001). Research has shown that some African American students experience IP (Austin, Clark, Ross, & Taylor, 2009; Cokley, McClain, Enciso, & Martinez, 2013; Ewing, Richardson, James-Myers, & Russell, 1996), yet there remains limited information on factors that may diminish the effects of IP among African American college students.

A dimension of racial identity, called private regard, and high self-esteem may affect the effect of IP among African American collegians. Private regard is the degree to which an African American individual feels positively about African American people and their membership in the group. African Americans who feel positively about their racial group membership tend to experience lower levels of stress and depressive symptoms, and higher self-esteem (Crocker, Luhtanen, Blaine, & Broadnax, 1994; Twenge & Crocker, 2002). High self-esteem, another resiliency factor, is associated with lower levels of IP (Sonnak & Towell, 2001).

Based on previous limited findings, the current study examined an exploratory mediation model of private regard, self-esteem, and IP among 112 African American college students. It was hypothesized that increased private regard would be associated with increased self-esteem, and self-esteem, in turn, would be associated with decreased feelings of IP.

**Background***The Impostor Phenomenon*

IP is characterized by a persistent perception of incompetency despite contrary evidence (Clance & Imes, 1978). This feeling of fraudulency has been

associated with anxiety, depression, excessive worry, fear of negative evaluation, poorer mental health, and diminished self-esteem (Cokley et al., 2013; Kumar & Jagacinski, 2006; McGregor, Gee, & Posey, 2008; Peteet, Brown, C., Lige, Q., & Lanaway, 2015; T. Thompson, David, & Davidson, 1998). In African American undergraduate samples, IP has been associated with depression, survivor guilt, psychological distress, and decreased self-esteem (Austin et al., 2009; Peteet et al., 2015). Austin et al. (2009) examined the relationship between survivor guilt, IP, and depression among a sample of African American college students. Survivor guilt was conceptualized as the psychological experience of African American students who have achieved access to educational opportunities unavailable to other African Americans. They hypothesized that feelings of survivor guilt would lead to increased feelings of IP, subsequently increasing depressive symptoms. The authors theorized that some African American students are aware of the systemic and institutionalized discrimination that has made it difficult for African Americans to pursue postsecondary education. The hypothesized model was supported, as IP mediated the relationship between survivor guilt and depression. These findings indicate that awareness of minority status can affect feelings of impostorism. It is evident that the knowledge and implications of being a student of color within the educational system may be associated with feelings of IP.

### *The Theory of Othering*

The theory of othering posits that societal norms and expectations predicate who is made to feel and be powerful versus who is made to assume a place of inferiority (Spivak, 1985). Due to their historically disadvantaged minority status in the United States, African American college students collectively may be seen as the “identifiable other” (Rawls & David, 2005, p. 469) and regarded and responded to as an inferior group in higher education.

Discrimination and racism, feelings of isolation, and diminished self-efficacy regarding academic performance are common obstacles for African American college students, suggesting that the academic environment for these students can be particularly stressful, ostracizing, and demeaning (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Levin, van Laar, & Sidanius, 2003). Furthermore, despite various academic achievements, some African American students are burdened by the need to prove their intellectual ability to their White peers and instructors (Baber, 2012). For African American students, the presence of IP and its correlates (e.g., inadequacy, high anxiety, and diminished self-esteem) may be associated with navigating through an educational infrastructure as a perceived “other.” In examining resiliency factors for African American

students, racial identity has been associated with positive psychological constructs, most notably self-esteem.

### *Racial Identity, Self-Esteem, and IP*

African American racial identity is defined as an individual's thoughts and beliefs about what it means to be African American and the level of importance and affect the individual places on this identity (Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997). One of the most commonly utilized racial identity models for African Americans is the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). Private regard, a dimension of the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity, is defined as one's global feelings toward African Americans and personal feelings about being African American (Sellers et al., 1997). A racial identity that looks favorably on African Americans and being African American has been associated with increased self-esteem and grade point average (GPA; Hope, Chavous, Jagers, & Sellers, 2013; Rowley, Sellers, Chavous, & Smith, 1998). Conversely, a negative, anti-African American and/or pro-White racial identity has been associated with anxiety, poor college adjustment, and feelings of inferiority (Anglin & Wade, 2007; Parham & Helms, 1985). Notably, these negative correlates are also associated with IP (Cozzarelli & Major, 1990; Ross & Krukowski, 2003; Sonnak & Towell, 2001; T. Thompson, Foreman, & Martin, 2000).

It appears that a racial identity that includes positive attitudes about African Americans is associated with increased self-esteem, and may be negatively associated with IP. Unfortunately, no known studies to date have examined the possible links between dimensions of racial identity and IP among African American undergraduate students. This is a concerning gap in the literature as racial identity is a significant construct for African American students who are entering young adulthood and, possibly for the first time, understanding the salience of their racial identity in a predominantly White academic environment. It is critical to better understand the relationship between racial identity dimensions and IP. Conversely, the inverse relationship between self-esteem and IP has been widely studied (Cozzarelli & Major, 1990; Sonnak & Towell, 2001).

Conceptually, it is logical that an individual who endorses IP will also endorse low self-esteem, as high IP individuals tend to discount success but internalize failure (Clance & Imes, 1978). Cozzarelli and Major (1990) found that students high in IP had lower trait self-esteem than non-IP sufferers. In another study, low self-esteem predicted higher levels of IP among a sample of college students, over and beyond other demographic and psychological factors (Sonnak & Towell, 2001).

## The Present Study

African American college students may be more susceptible to feelings of IP due to the environmental cues as the “other” or inferior group in higher education and society. However, feelings of IP may be diminished by increased private regard through the mediating variable of self-esteem. Individuals who feel positively about being African American tend to report greater feelings of academic competence, overall college adjustment, increased well-being, and high self-esteem (Anglin & Wade, 2007; Rowley et al., 1998). Furthermore, IP and self-esteem have an established relationship in non-African American samples (Cozzarelli & Major, 1990; Sonnak & Towell, 2001), but this relationship has been underexplored in African American samples (Petee et al., 2015). Based on the literature, it is hypothesized that increased private regard will be associated with increased self-esteem, which subsequently will be associated with decreased IP.

## Method

### Participants

The participants were 112 (74% female) self-identified African American undergraduate students. The participants were enrolled in both public and private predominantly White institutions (PWIs) in the South and Midwest regions of the United States. The majority of the participants were freshmen and sophomores (65.2%); science, technology, engineering, and mathematics majors (72.5%); and from middle- to high-income backgrounds (61.8%). Participant demographics are presented in Table 1. The present study is using previously collected data from a larger study on African American students and the IP and, unfortunately, age was not captured for the participants.

### Measures

*Private Regard.* The participants completed the six-item Private Regard subscale of the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (MIBI; Sellers et al., 1997) to assess participants’ feelings toward African Americans and their membership in the group. The participants responded with their perceived level of agreement to each item on a 7-point Likert-type scale (ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*). Example items include “I am proud to be Black” and “I feel that the Black community has made valuable contributions to this society.” A higher cumulative score reflects participants’ increased positive feelings toward African Americans and their involvement

**Table 1.** Sample Demographics.

Demographics	n (%)
Gender	
Female	83 (74)
Male	25 (22)
Missing	4 (3.6)
School standing	
Freshman	40 (35.7)
Sophomore	33 (29.5)
Junior	21 (18.8)
Senior	18 (16.1)
College major	
Social sciences	45 (41.3)
Professional and engineering	23 (21.1)
Education	18 (16.5)
Arts and humanities	12 (11)
Physical sciences	11 (10.1)
Grade point average ranges	
0.0-2.0	1 (0.9)
2.0-2.4	14 (12.7)
2.5-2.9	48 (43.6)
3.0-3.5	35 (31.8)
3.6-3.9	11 (9.8)
4.0+	1 (0.9)
Socioeconomic status	
\$0-\$14,000	13 (11.8)
\$15,000-\$30,000	29 (26.4)
\$31,000-\$70,000	38 (34.5)
\$71,000+	30 (27.3)

in the group. The MIBI has been found to have moderate internal consistency (Simmons, Worrell, & Berry, 2008). In this study, Cronbach's alpha for the Private Regard subscale was .85.

*Self-Esteem.* To assess feelings of self-esteem, the participants completed the 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). On a 4-point Likert-type scale (ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*), the participants responded with their level of agreement to each item. An example item is "I am able to do things as well as most other people." Higher self-esteem was demonstrated by higher cumulative scores. The

Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale has been found to have good validity and reliability among African Americans (Sinclair et al., 2010). In this study, Cronbach's alpha for the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was .90.

*Impostorism.* The Clance Impostor Scale (CIPS; Clance, 1985) is a 20-item measure that assesses the degree to which an individual feels like an impostor or academic fraud. The participants responded with their perceived degree of truth to each item on a 5-point Likert-type scale (ranging from *not at all true* to *very true*). An example item is "I often worry about not succeeding with a project or on an examination, even though others around me have considerable confidence that I will do well." A higher cumulative score reflects greater feelings of impostorism. The CIPS has a reported Cronbach's alpha of .92 for the total score (French, Ullrich-French, & Follman, 2008). In this study, Cronbach's alpha for the CIPS was .91.

## Procedure

After receiving the appropriate institutional review board approval, the participants were recruited in three ways: (a) recruitment statements posted on Facebook groups that included African American students, (b) announcements made in an introduction to psychology course, and (c) recruitment statements e-mailed through university psychology listservs around the country. Participants included in the study were self-identified African American students enrolled in an associate or baccalaureate degree program and consenting adults (age 18+). All of the participants were provided with a web-secured survey link through the SurveyMonkey website to an anonymous questionnaire. Each participant indicated consent before beginning the survey and were aware their participation was voluntary. The current study was part of a larger study on parental racial socialization and IP, thus the participants completed several measures not included in the present study. The questionnaire took approximately 15 minutes to complete. The only incentive was research credit for students in introduction to psychology courses.

## Results

Preliminary analyses included Pearson's correlations between the major study variables (i.e., private regard, self-esteem, and IP) and demographic characteristics. Correlation analyses revealed no significant associations between the dependent variable, IP, and demographic variables including gender, family income, and class standing. However, a Spearman correlation

**Table 2.** Correlations and Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables.

Measure	1	2	3	<i>M (SD)</i>
1. Racial identity	—	.46*	-.26*	6.04 (1.03)
2. Self-esteem	—	—	-.65*	3.30 (0.56)
3. Impostorism	—	—	—	54.48 (14.74)

Note: The *N* for all measures was 112.

\* $p < .01$ .

revealed a significant association between IP and GPA ( $r = -.27, p = .004$ ; a Spearman correlation was utilized because GPA was a categorical variable); thus, GPA was controlled for in the mediation model.

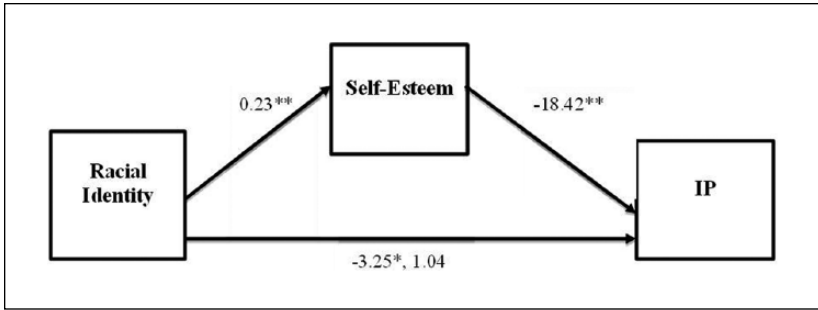
Pearson's correlations for the study variables revealed support for the predicted path directions. Private regard was positively and significantly associated with self-esteem and inversely associated with IP. Self-esteem was negatively and significantly associated with IP. See Table 2 for the correlations and descriptive statistics of the study variables.

To test the mediation model, the Preacher and Hayes (2008) indirect effects approach was utilized. As recommended for small samples, nonparametric bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples was used (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). The results of model testing revealed support for the mediation model. See Figure 1. There was a significant, positive direct effect of racial identity on self-esteem,  $B = 0.23, p < .001$ . There was a significant, negative direct effect of self-esteem on IP,  $B = -18.42, p < .001$ . The total effect of the model, not controlling for the mediator (self-esteem), was significant,  $B = -3.25, r^2 = .44, p < .05$ . The direct effect of racial identity on IP, controlling for self-esteem, was not significant,  $B = 1.04, p > .05$ . The results of model testing revealed support for the model (95% bias corrected confidence intervals  $[-6.31, -2.56]$ ), such that participants who indicated higher levels of private regard reported higher self-esteem, and through higher self-esteem, reported lower levels of IP. Private regard and self-esteem accounted for 46% of the variance of IP.

## Discussion

The current study examined an exploratory mediation model linking private regard, self-esteem, and IP. Data analyses revealed support for the model. In a sample of African American college students, those who felt positively toward African Americans and their membership in the group were more likely to have higher self-esteem and subsequently lower levels of IP.





**Figure 1.** The indirect effect of self-esteem on the relationship between private regard and Impostor Phenomenon (IP).  
\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

The theory of othering suggests that African American students may feel ostracized and perceived as the “other” in higher education settings. This perception as an anomaly in higher education may lead some students to experience increased feelings of IP. Perhaps African American students who have increased private regard and self-esteem possess better coping skills (e.g., self-confidence, self-efficacy) in dealing with a potentially discriminatory and isolating environment at PWIs. Conversely, African American students who do not view African Americans favorably and subscribe less to their African American identity may potentially internalize being the perceived “other” in higher education and feel like they do not belong. Further research is needed to expound on these exploratory findings. Notably, the direct effect, controlling for the mediating variable self-esteem, of racial identity on IP in the mediation model was not significant, suggesting that racial identity alone may not be sufficient in reducing feelings of IP among African American students. Similar findings were present in the Ewing et al.’s (1996) study for African American graduate students.

The current study has some limitations that should be noted. Gender differences were not captured due to the limited number of males in the study. This is a common occurrence in research utilizing African American college students, as African American males are less represented in higher education. Recent research has indicated that IP may differ as a function of gender (Cokley et al., 2015; Jöstl, Bergsmann, Lüftenegger, Schober, & Spiel, 2012); therefore, future research should focus on understanding the differential influences on IP among African American men and women. Additionally, this was a cross-sectional study and thus, inferences about causation could not be made. Longitudinal studies examining the influence of racial identity and

self-esteem on IP are needed. Furthermore, self-report measures were utilized to capture the study variables. Although self-report measures have been widely utilized in IP research, participant bias is likely to be present when using this data collection approach.

Despite the limitations, this exploratory study provided empirical evidence for the presence of IP among a sample of African American college students. Few studies have examined IP solely among African American college student samples, which is particularly crucial considering the educational disparities for African Americans in higher education (Austin et al., 2009; Ewing et al., 1996). We used an exploratory mediation model to introduce potential underlying mechanisms of IP as well as identify ways to limit the presence of IP among African American students.

Future work should consider examining differences in IP among African American college students attending PWIs and historically Black colleges and universities to better understand how minority status and other racial identity-related constructs (e.g., racial socialization, invisibility) may influence IP. It is likely that racial identity attitudes and feelings of IP may differ between students at these institutions. The relationship between African American students' experiences of racial discrimination and IP also warrants further study. The perception of being an "outsider" may be bolstered by societal messages about being African American, such as the recent national events of police brutality against African Americans. These compounded events of racist and discriminatory messages and behaviors targeted at African Americans are likely to affect students' psychological well-being, possibly increasing feelings of IP. IP has also been linked to decreased academic self-concept (Cokley et al., 2015), suggesting that individuals high in IP may perceive themselves as academically incapable. A low academic self-concept, associated with IP, could possibly be a mechanism affecting degree attainment for African American college students. Further research is needed to examine academic factors and outcomes associated with feelings of IP among African American college students.

To address the presence of IP among African American college students, educators, administrators, and college counselors should focus on the psychosocial (e.g., racial identity, self-esteem) needs of African American students. Educators must be held accountable for diverse content and creating an inclusive atmosphere in the classroom environment. Counselors should provide support for navigating the transition into college, especially at PWIs. Workshops that connect diverse students and facilitate positive identity development and provide a conceptualization of impostorism may be useful. Administrators should work to increase the cultural awareness and sensitivity

of the campus environment and provide appropriate social supports and resources. These actions may reduce the negative affect of impostorism on African American college students.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The work of Dr. Bridgette J. Peteeet was partially supported by a National Institutes of Health Diversity Supplement (3R01DA033866-04S1).

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