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Research Paper

Gender Differences in Impostor Phenomenon and Anxiety among Young Adults: A Cross-Sectional Study

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ABSTRACT

Young adulthood represents a critical developmental phase characterized by significant personal, social, academic, and professional transitions that may influence psychological well-being. Among the psychological experiences associated with this developmental period, impostor phenomenon has received increasing attention because of its association with self-doubt and psychological distress. The present study aims to investigate the relationship between impostor phenomenon and anxiety among young adults, with a specific focus on examining gender differences in these variables. The sample comprises 105 young adults from India, including 53 females and 52 males, selected using convenience sampling. Standardized psychological measures are administered, namely the Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (CIPS) and the Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7). Statistical analysis is performed using descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation coefficient, simple linear regression, and independent-samples t-tests. The findings reveal a significant positive correlation between impostor phenomenon and anxiety symptoms, $r = .478$, $p < .001$. Regression analysis indicates that impostor phenomenon significantly statistically predicts anxiety scores and explains 22.9% of the variance in anxiety scores. No statistically significant gender differences are found in impostor phenomenon or anxiety symptoms. The study concludes that greater impostor experiences are associated with higher anxiety symptoms among young adults and highlights the importance of further research into achievement-related self-doubt and psychological well-being.

Keywords: *Impostor Phenomenon, Anxiety Symptoms, Young Adults, Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale, GAD-7, Gender Differences*

Young adulthood is an important developmental period characterized by substantial academic, professional, social, and personal transitions. During this stage, individuals often encounter increased expectations related to education, career development, interpersonal relationships, independence, and future achievement. Although these transitions can provide opportunities for growth, they may also involve uncertainty, performance pressure, and heightened self-evaluation. Such demands can be particularly relevant to psychological experiences involving self-doubt and anxiety.

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One psychological experience that has received increasing attention in academic and professional settings is the impostor phenomenon. Clance and Imes (1978) originally described the phenomenon among high-achieving women who, despite objective evidence of competence and achievement, experienced persistent doubts about their abilities and feared being exposed as fraudulent. Clance (1985) later conceptualized impostor experiences as a recurring pattern in which individuals have difficulty internalizing their achievements and attribute success to external or unstable factors such as luck, timing, assistance, or excessive effort. Consequently, successful experiences may fail to strengthen perceptions of competence, allowing self-doubt to re-emerge when individuals encounter subsequent achievement-related challenges.

Although the phenomenon was initially described among high-achieving women, subsequent research indicates that impostor experiences occur across different genders, educational settings, and occupational groups (Bravata et al., 2020; Mak et al., 2019; Sakulku & Alexander, 2011). The impostor phenomenon is not considered a psychiatric disorder; rather, it refers to a pattern of thoughts, feelings, and experiences involving perceived inadequacy despite evidence of competence (Mak et al., 2019). Individuals experiencing impostor phenomenon may report persistent self-doubt, concerns about being exposed as incompetent, difficulty accepting positive feedback, fear of failure, and perfectionistic tendencies. These experiences may be particularly salient in environments involving evaluation, achievement, and comparison with others.

The psychological relevance of impostor phenomenon is supported by evidence linking it with psychological distress and difficulties in adjustment. Research has associated impostor experiences with anxiety, depression, reduced self-esteem, perfectionism, and difficulties in academic or occupational functioning (Bravata et al., 2020; Thomas & Bigatti, 2020). Anxiety is particularly relevant because achievement-related situations may involve concerns about failure, negative evaluation, and perceived inadequacy. For young adults navigating academic and professional transitions, repeated doubts about competence may therefore coexist with heightened anxiety symptoms.

Anxiety involves excessive worry, apprehension, and perceptions of threat that can interfere with psychological functioning. Cognitive models propose that anxiety is influenced by how individuals appraise situations and their perceived ability to cope with potential threats (Beck & Clark, 1997). Achievement-related situations such as examinations, presentations, interviews, and performance evaluations may be perceived as particularly threatening when individuals doubt their competence. In this context, concerns about failure or exposure of perceived inadequacy may contribute to anticipatory worry, heightened self-monitoring, and fear of negative evaluation. Empirical research provides support for an association between impostor phenomenon and psychological distress. Bravata et al. (2020), in a systematic review, identified anxiety and other forms of psychological distress among outcomes associated with impostor phenomenon. Thomas and Bigatti (2020) similarly reported associations between impostor experiences and psychological well-being among graduate students. Such findings indicate that difficulty internalizing achievements may coexist with anxiety-related experiences. However, existing evidence does not establish that impostor phenomenon causes anxiety, particularly because much of the available research is based on cross-sectional designs. The direction and nature of the association therefore require continued empirical examination.

An additional issue concerns gender. The original conceptualization of impostor phenomenon emerged from observations of high-achieving women (Clance & Imes, 1978), which contributed to an early emphasis on women in subsequent discussions of the phenomenon. However, later research has demonstrated that impostor experiences occur among both men and women, and findings regarding the magnitude and consistency of gender differences have been mixed (Bravata et al., 2020; Mak et al., 2019). Evidence from different cultural contexts also suggests that gender patterns may not be uniform. For example, Price et al. (2024) reported that gender differences in impostor phenomenon were smaller in Asian studies than in studies conducted in Western contexts.

Recent research from India also indicates that impostor phenomenon is relevant among student populations. Studies conducted among Indian college and university students have reported associations between impostor experiences and psychological or academic variables, including anxiety and academic functioning (Bhardwaj et al., 2024; Sankar & Krishnan, 2022). However, existing Indian research has often focused on specific student groups, such as nursing or medical students, or has examined impostor phenomenon in relation to broader academic and psychological variables rather than specifically examining anxiety symptoms and gender differences among young adult students across educational backgrounds.

Despite the growing literature on impostor phenomenon and psychological distress, several issues remain relevant for further investigation. First, existing studies have frequently examined impostor phenomenon within specific academic, professional, or occupational groups, which may limit the generalizability of findings to young adults more broadly. Second, although an association between impostor phenomenon and anxiety has been reported, continued examination across different populations and contexts is warranted because psychological experiences of achievement, evaluation, and self-comparison may differ across settings. Third, evidence concerning gender differences is not entirely consistent, and findings from Asian contexts suggest that patterns observed in Western samples may not necessarily generalize across cultures. Examining the association between impostor phenomenon and anxiety while also assessing gender differences can therefore contribute to a more context-sensitive understanding of these psychological experiences among young adults from India.

Rationale

In view of these gaps, the present study examines the relationship between impostor phenomenon and anxiety symptoms among young adults. Specifically, it investigates whether higher levels of impostor phenomenon are associated with higher anxiety symptoms and whether impostor phenomenon statistically predicts anxiety scores. The study also examines whether male and female young adults differ in their levels of impostor phenomenon and anxiety symptoms. By focusing on these two directly assessed constructs and examining both their association and gender differences, the study seeks to extend existing evidence on achievement-related self-doubt and psychological distress during young adulthood.

Objectives

The objectives of the present study are:

1. To examine the relationship between impostor phenomenon and anxiety symptoms among young adults.

2. To determine whether impostor phenomenon significantly predicts anxiety symptoms among young adults.
3. To examine gender differences in impostor phenomenon among young adults.
4. To examine gender differences in anxiety symptoms among young adults.

Hypotheses

To address these objectives, we formulated the following hypotheses:

- **H1.** There will be a significant positive relationship between impostor phenomenon and anxiety symptoms among young adults.
- **H2.** Impostor phenomenon will significantly predict anxiety symptoms among young adults.
- **H3.** Male and female young adults will differ significantly in their levels of impostor phenomenon.
- **H4.** Male and female young adults will differ significantly in their levels of anxiety symptoms.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The present study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional correlational research design. Data were collected using an online self-report standardized questionnaire. Participants were recruited using convenience sampling.

Sample

The final sample comprised 105 young adults from India. Participants had a mean age of 22.60 years (*SD* = 5.06), with ages ranging from 18 to 30 years. The gender distribution was relatively balanced, comprising 53 females (50.5%) and 52 males (49.5%). Of the total sample, 31 participants (29.5%) were categorized as Intermediate, 39 (37.1%) as Graduate, and 35 (33.3%) as Postgraduate. Participants were eligible for inclusion if they were between 18 and 30 years of age, were currently enrolled as college students, and provided informed consent to participate. Participants who did not meet the inclusion criteria or who did not provide informed consent were excluded from the study. Participants reporting a prior diagnosis of a neurological or psychological disorder were also excluded, in accordance with the study's eligibility criteria.

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection.

Instruments

Data were collected using a brief sociodemographic questionnaire and two standardized self-report psychometric instruments: the Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (CIPS) and the Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7).

- **Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (CIPS):** Impostor phenomenon was assessed using the Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (CIPS), developed by Clance (1985). The CIPS is a 20-item self-report measure designed to assess impostor-related thoughts and feelings. Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all true*) to 5 (*very true*), resulting in a total score ranging from 20 to 100. Higher scores indicate more frequent and intense impostor experiences (Clance, 1985). Scores of 40 or below indicate few impostor characteristics, scores from 41 to

60 indicate moderate impostor experiences, scores from 61 to 80 indicate frequent impostor feelings, and scores from 81 to 100 indicate intense impostor experiences (Clance, 1985). The CIPS demonstrated high internal consistency in the present sample, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of $\alpha = .898$.

- **Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7):** Anxiety symptoms were assessed using the Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7), developed by Spitzer et al. (2006). The GAD-7 is a seven-item self-report screening instrument that assesses the frequency of anxiety symptoms experienced during the previous two weeks. Each item is rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 3 (*nearly every day*). Total scores range from 0 to 21, with higher scores indicating greater anxiety symptom severity. GAD-7 scores are commonly interpreted as 0–4 indicating minimal anxiety, 5–9 indicating mild anxiety, 10–14 indicating moderate anxiety, and 15–21 indicating severe anxiety. A score of 10 or higher is commonly used as a threshold for identifying individuals who may warrant further clinical assessment for generalized anxiety disorder. The original validation study demonstrated excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$) and good test-retest reliability (intraclass correlation = .83), along with evidence of criterion and construct validity (Spitzer et al., 2006). The Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7) demonstrated good internal consistency in the present sample, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of $\alpha = .853$.

Procedure

The survey was distributed electronically to eligible participants. Before accessing the questionnaire, participants were presented with an informed consent form explaining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to discontinue participation. Only participants who provided informed consent proceeded to the study questionnaire. Participants first completed the sociodemographic questionnaire, followed by the CIPS and GAD-7. The instruments were administered in a fixed order to maintain consistency across participants. Completion of the questionnaire required approximately 5–10 minutes. Following data collection, the responses were downloaded, screened, cleaned, and coded for statistical analysis. Incomplete responses were excluded prior to analysis. The final dataset consisted of 105 participants.

Statistical Analysis

Statistical analyses were conducted using jamovi version 2.7.37. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages, were calculated to summarize the demographic characteristics of the participants and the distributions of impostor phenomenon and anxiety scores. Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to examine the relationship between impostor phenomenon and anxiety symptoms. A simple linear regression analysis was subsequently conducted to examine whether impostor phenomenon statistically predicted anxiety scores. Independent-samples *t*-tests were conducted to examine gender differences in impostor phenomenon and anxiety symptoms. Levene's test was used to assess the assumption of homogeneity of variance before interpreting the independent-samples *t*-test results.

RESULTS

The findings derived from the statistical analysis are presented below:

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	SD
Age	22.6	5.06
CIPS	58.7	16.2
GAD-7	8.75	5.40

Table 01 shows that the participants had a mean age of 22.60 years (*SD* = 5.06). The mean CIPS score was 58.70 (*SD* = 16.20), while the mean GAD-7 score was 8.75 (*SD* = 5.40). The CIPS mean falls within the range commonly interpreted as moderate impostor experiences, whereas the GAD-7 mean falls within the mild symptom range. The presence of impostor experiences and anxiety symptoms in this sample is consistent with previous research identifying these concerns among young adults and university students (Bravata et al., 2020; Pákozdy et al., 2024).

Table 2: Gender and Education Distribution and Mean Age

Variable		N	Percentage	Mean age (Years)
Gender	Female	53	50.5%	22.83
	Male	52	49.5%	22.37
Education	Intermediate	31	29.5%	19.03
	Graduate	39	37.1%	23.59
	Post Graduate	35	33.3%	24.66

Table 02 indicates that the sample comprised 53 female participants (50.5%) and 52 male participants (49.5%), providing a relatively balanced gender distribution. The participants were distributed across the reported educational categories, with 31 (29.5%) classified as Intermediate, 39 (37.1%) as Graduate, and 35 (33.3%) as Postgraduate. The representation of participants at different educational stages is relevant because previous research has examined impostor experiences across diverse student populations and academic settings (Bravata et al., 2020; Pákozdy et al., 2024).

Table 3: Correlation Between Impostor Phenomenon and Anxiety

	Impostor Phenomenon	Anxiety
Impostor Phenomenon	1	.478***
Anxiety	.478***	1

Note. ***Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed). N = 105.

Table 03 shows a significant positive correlation between impostor phenomenon and anxiety symptoms ($r = .478$, $p < .001$). Thus, participants reporting higher impostor experiences also tended to report higher anxiety symptoms. The moderate association is consistent with previous research reporting a relationship between impostor experiences and psychological distress, including anxiety (Bravata et al., 2020; Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016).

Table 4: Linear Regression Predicting Anxiety from Impostor Phenomenon

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
(Constant)	−0.604	1.756	—	−0.344	.732
Impostor Phenomenon	0.159	0.029	.478	5.524	<.001

Model Summary: R = .478, R^2 = .229, F(1, 103) = 30.5, p < .001

Table 04 indicates that the regression model was statistically significant, $F(1, 103) = 30.50$, $p < .001$. Impostor phenomenon accounted for 22.9% of the variance in anxiety scores ($R^2 = .229$). The regression coefficient was positive and statistically significant ($\beta = .478$, $t = 5.524$, $p < .001$), indicating that higher impostor phenomenon scores were associated with higher anxiety scores in the regression model. This finding is broadly consistent with previous research linking impostor experiences with psychological distress (Bravata et al., 2020).

Table 5: Independent Samples t-Test: Gender Differences in Impostor Phenomenon and Anxiety

Variable	Female *M* (*SD*)	Male *M* (*SD*)	t	df	p	Cohen's d
Impostor Phenomenon	60.75 (16.00)	56.62 (16.30)	1.31	103	.192	0.256
Anxiety	9.42 (5.84)	8.08 (4.88)	1.27	103	.206	0.249

Note. *Levene's test confirmed equal variances for impostor syndrome (F = 0.861, p = .356) and anxiety (F = 1.875, p = .174).*

Table 05 indicates that female participants obtained a higher mean score on impostor phenomenon ($M = 60.75$, $SD = 16.00$) than male participants ($M = 56.62$, $SD = 16.30$). However, the difference was not statistically significant, $t(103) = 1.31$, $p = .192$, with a small effect size (Cohen's $d = .256$). Similarly, female participants reported a higher mean level of anxiety symptoms ($M = 9.42$, $SD = 5.84$) than male participants ($M = 8.08$, $SD = 4.88$), but the difference was not statistically significant, $t(103) = 1.27$, $p = .206$, with a small effect size (Cohen's $d = .249$). Therefore, no statistically significant gender differences were observed in impostor phenomenon or anxiety symptoms.

DISCUSSION

The present study shows a clear pattern between the impostor phenomenon and anxiety symptoms among young adults. Participants who reported stronger impostor experiences also tended to report higher levels of anxiety symptoms. At the same time, no statistically significant differences were observed between male and female participants in either the impostor phenomenon or anxiety symptoms. Taken together, these findings suggest that persistent doubts about one's competence may be closely associated with psychological distress during young adulthood, although the present cross-sectional design does not establish a causal relationship.

The positive association between impostor phenomenon and anxiety symptoms is consistent with the original description of the construct by Clance and Imes (1978). Individuals experiencing the impostor phenomenon may continue to doubt their competence despite objective evidence of achievement and may fear that their perceived lack of ability will eventually be exposed. Such concerns can make situations involving evaluation,

achievement, or comparison particularly stressful. Clance (1985) further described impostor experiences as a recurring pattern in which successful outcomes may be attributed to luck, excessive effort, or external circumstances rather than to one's own ability. As a result, achievement may provide only temporary reassurance, while the next academic or performance-related challenge may again trigger uncertainty and self-doubt.

The finding is also broadly supported by previous empirical research. Bravata et al. (2020), in a systematic review, reported consistent associations between impostor experiences and psychological distress, including anxiety and depression. Research among university students has similarly indicated that individuals with stronger impostor experiences tend to report greater anxiety and perceived stress (Jansson et al., 2025). Neureiter and Traut-Mattausch (2016) also found that the impostor phenomenon was related to psychological distress among university students and highlighted the importance of perfectionistic concerns in understanding this relationship. More recent research has further linked impostor experiences with anxiety, fear of failure, and burnout among university students (Dumitrescu & De Caluwé, 2024). The consistency of these findings across different student populations provides support for the pattern observed in the present study.

One possible explanation is that individuals experiencing the impostor phenomenon may have difficulty using previous success as evidence of their own competence. For example, a student may receive a good grade but interpret the result as being due to luck, an easy examination, or excessive preparation rather than ability. When another evaluation occurs, the previous success may therefore provide little confidence. Instead, the individual may become concerned about whether the previous performance can be repeated. This continual uncertainty may increase worry and sensitivity to negative evaluation. Leary et al. (2000) similarly suggested that impostor experiences are related to self-perceptions and reflected appraisals, particularly concerns about how one's competence is perceived by others.

The relationship can also be considered from the perspective of perfectionism and self-evaluation. Young adults are frequently exposed to academic and career-related expectations, and some may respond by setting exceptionally high standards for themselves. When achievement is judged against unrealistic standards, successful performance may be viewed as merely adequate rather than as evidence of competence. Research by Pákozdy et al. (2024) found that the impostor phenomenon among university students was associated with perfectionism and lower self-efficacy and happiness. Cokley et al. (2018) also highlighted the relationship between perfectionism, self-esteem, and impostor feelings. From this perspective, anxiety may be associated with the impostor phenomenon because individuals who doubt their competence may become increasingly concerned about failure, criticism, or not meeting their own standards.

The findings can therefore be understood through a cognitive self-evaluation framework. When individuals interpret their achievements as unreliable evidence of ability, future performance situations may be perceived as threats to their self-image. This may lead to increased self-monitoring, worry about mistakes, and fear of negative evaluation. Rather than confidence increasing after successful performance, uncertainty may remain. Over time, repeated cycles of achievement followed by self-doubt may be associated with greater anxiety symptoms. This interpretation is consistent with research showing that impostor experiences involve difficulties in accurately internalizing positive achievement information and maintaining a stable sense of competence (Leary et al., 2000).

The regression findings provide further support for the importance of this relationship. Impostor phenomenon significantly statistically predicted anxiety scores, with the model accounting for 22.9% of the variance. This represents a meaningful proportion of variability within the present sample and suggests that impostor experiences may contribute to understanding individual differences in anxiety symptoms. However, the result should be interpreted carefully. Statistical prediction does not mean that impostor phenomenon causes anxiety. Because the data were collected at a single point in time, temporal precedence cannot be established. It is possible that persistent impostor experiences are associated with increased anxiety, but it is also possible that individuals experiencing greater anxiety become more self-critical or uncertain about their abilities. Other variables, such as perfectionism, self-esteem, academic stress, social comparison, and fear of negative evaluation, may also contribute to both experiences.

The absence of statistically significant gender differences was another important finding. Although the original formulation of impostor phenomenon emerged from observations of high-achieving women (Clance & Imes, 1978), subsequent research has shown that impostor experiences are not restricted to women. Bravata et al. (2020) reported evidence of impostor experiences across different populations, while Mak et al. (2019) similarly emphasized that the phenomenon can occur across demographic groups. The present findings are therefore consistent with the broader view that impostor experiences may be experienced by both male and female young adults.

However, the absence of a significant gender difference should not be interpreted as evidence that gender never matters. A recent meta-analysis by Price et al. (2024), involving more than 40,000 participants, identified a small overall gender difference, with women reporting somewhat higher impostor experiences than men. Importantly, the difference was smaller in Asian samples than in Western samples. This finding is relevant when considering the present Indian sample. Differences in educational environments, social expectations, cultural values, achievement pressures, and gender roles may influence how impostor experiences are expressed or reported. Therefore, the relatively similar scores observed among male and female participants in the present study may reflect the particular characteristics of this sample rather than the absence of gender differences in all young adult populations.

A similar pattern was observed for anxiety symptoms, for which no statistically significant difference was found between male and female participants. This suggests that gender alone may not adequately explain individual differences in anxiety symptoms within the present sample. Factors such as academic pressure, self-esteem, perfectionism, perceived social support, financial concerns, and uncertainty about future employment may be relevant across both male and female groups. The findings therefore support a broader approach in which psychological and contextual variables are considered alongside demographic characteristics.

The findings have practical relevance for educational settings. Young adults experiencing impostor phenomenon may not necessarily appear unsuccessful because impostor experiences can occur alongside objectively strong academic performance. Some individuals may respond to self-doubt by working excessively, repeatedly checking their work, avoiding challenging opportunities, or experiencing substantial worry before evaluations. Educational institutions may therefore benefit from supportive mentoring, constructive feedback,

realistic academic expectations, and environments in which students can discuss performance-related concerns without interpreting them as evidence of incompetence. Interventions addressing perfectionistic thinking and strengthening self-efficacy may also be useful, given their reported relationships with impostor experiences (Pákozdy et al., 2024).

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. The cross-sectional and correlational design prevents conclusions about causal direction. Convenience sampling and the relatively small sample limit the generalizability of the findings to the wider population of Indian young adults. The study also relied on self-report measures, which may be influenced by response tendencies and participants' interpretation of the items. In addition, anxiety symptoms were assessed using the GAD-7 rather than through a clinical diagnostic assessment; therefore, the findings should not be interpreted as evidence that participants had generalized anxiety disorder. Other potentially relevant variables, including perfectionism, self-esteem, self-efficacy, academic stress, fear of negative evaluation, and social comparison, were not examined.

Future research could address these limitations by using larger and more diverse samples from different regions, educational institutions, and academic disciplines. Longitudinal research would be particularly valuable for determining whether changes in impostor experiences are followed by changes in anxiety symptoms or whether the two variables influence one another over time. Future studies could also examine whether perfectionism, self-esteem, self-efficacy, or fear of negative evaluation mediate or moderate the relationship between impostor phenomenon and anxiety. Incorporating interviews or behavioural measures alongside self-report questionnaires could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how impostor experiences are expressed in everyday academic and professional settings.

CONCLUSION

The study establishes that impostor phenomenon is an important psychological experience in young adulthood and is closely related to anxiety symptoms. The findings indicate that difficulties in recognizing and accepting personal competence have relevance for psychological well-being during this developmental period. The study identifies impostor phenomenon as a meaningful factor in understanding individual differences in anxiety symptoms. This finding supports the view that persistent self-doubt and concerns about personal competence deserve attention in young adult populations. The findings further indicate that impostor experiences are not limited to one gender. Similar patterns of impostor phenomenon and anxiety symptoms are observed among male and female participants in the present sample.

Overall, the study highlights the importance of addressing achievement-related self-doubt as part of psychological well-being in young adults. Greater awareness of impostor experiences may support early identification of psychological difficulties and encourage healthier patterns of self-evaluation in educational settings.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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