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AI Practitioner



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The True-Colours Phenomenon: Turning the Imposter Syndrome Upside Down

The term 'Imposter Syndrome' is a powerful name to a challenging phenomenon that is experienced by many. Through the lens of Appreciative Inquiry, the authors of this article reframed the challenge into a new term – the True-Colours Phenomenon with the hope to unlock people's unique potential. This life-giving term opens up many possibilities to expand our awareness and develop ourselves more authentically.



Words create worlds

Occasionally, a new term is introduced within the world of Applied Behavioural Sciences that grabs the attention of many because it is meaningful and relevant. It captures something we might have

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The Imposter Syndrome: A loud and non-appreciative inner 'voice' affecting many highly capable individuals.

felt, experienced or encountered before but couldn't quite describe in words. The new term helps us explain how we (or others we know) feel or behave in a concise, clear and powerful way. It is adopted widely and becomes present in our discourse. Next, it is developed and expanded. Different parties give life to it and socially construct new meanings and interpretations. In some cases, the term becomes so powerful and present that an industry grows around it, with many solutions and related services. Amidst this expansion of "awareness", we might never stop to reflect on the reality this term actually creates.

One such term that has taken root and grown is "Imposter Syndrome". It captures feelings and experiences many people have.

What is the Impostor Syndrome?

"Imposter syndrome" (originally impostor phenomenon) was coined by Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes in 1978. Since then, it has been extensively studied and discussed. For some it is a clear and conscious experience, while for others it may only be subconsciously present. Either way, it can be powerfully felt and affects lives in a number of ways.

Broadly speaking there are three main themes in the imposter syndrome:

1. Not believing you deserve the success you have achieved.
2. A feeling of fraudulence about that success.
3. A feeling of dread that you will be found out.

A simple search online can point one to a plethora of approaches or techniques to deal with, reduce or overcome this problem.

We have been thinking about this syndrome because it has been a lived experience for both of us, anchoring many intense life experiences under its catchy banner.

Our Imposter Syndrome Stories

David's story

My imposter syndrome looks like that easily recognisable, yet uninvited and unwelcome guest at every major event of my life. Just like that strange auntie you know well but don't really like … you know that as soon as she's close

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enough, she will pinch your cheek rather painfully, wake you up from your joyful daydream of success and remind you that you are just a little boy … no matter how old you happen to be or how much progress you've made since she last saw you. My "auntie" loves popping in for tea and overstaying her welcome.

I am sure my imposter auntie was around from an early age, but my first vivid memory of her turning up unexpectedly and hanging around quite regularly was during my MBA studies in the US, when I was one of the youngest students and the only one from my country. Over two years, she paid me many visits, reminding me that it was just pure luck that I happened to be there or achieve anything. Each time I attained a professional or personal achievement, she visited. Her persistent chatter sounded like the buzz of an annoying mosquito. I've written two books, worked with senior leaders, facilitated small- and large-scale events, led challenging projects and impacted many people positively – yet often, when a new opportunity arrives, my auntie is right by its side!

Vivien's story

I grew up in a typical Hong Kong Chinese family, and raised with the concept of being "never good enough". When I scored 99 in an exam, the focus would be on where the last point was lost, rather than how I scored 99 points and demonstrated the knowledge I had acquired and the efforts I had put in. The "never good enough" concept was used by my family with good intention as a "motivator" to help me improve. As time went by, it became part of me, a critical voice inside me.

From the beginning of my beautiful professional career as an organisational psychologist, I was the youngest or one of the youngest amongst my peers in the workplace. This pattern continued well into my career. My colleagues and clients are high-calibre leaders, world-class experts and highflyers in their professional specialties. I have helped many of them grow and develop.

The "never good enough" self-talk bundled with the fact of being the youngest, Asian female has helped me develop a very mature imposter syndrome!

Are we getting closer to what we want to have?



As Appreciative Inquiry practitioners, we always remind ourselves that what we focus on grows. We could see there was potential in reframing the impostor syndrome by creating a more life-giving term for people to embrace in their daily life, practice or work. Something that describes what we actually want to see or experience *more of*. Our quest became clear: Could we identify the unexpressed

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What we focus on grows!
Genuinely, who am I?

wishes behind the imposter syndrome and capture them in a new, life-giving term? What might happen if we shifted our attention from the challenges of the imposter syndrome to the possibilities of a new, yet-to-be-named phenomenon?

To start, we attempted to identify what we wanted to experience *instead of* the three themes mentioned above:

Original undesirable theme	Reframed themes – what we wish to have instead
Not believing you deserve the success you have achieved.	I deserve the success I have achieved. (Past). I deserve my current place. (Present). I deserve the seen and unseen opportunities. (Future).
Feeling fraudulent about that success.	I am qualified. I am credible and capable. I have relevant track of past success. I am capable of doing this. I have the learning ability, curiosity and motivation to figure things out.
Dread of being found out.	People will discover (will be amazed) that I know, I can and I am credible in this area. I am real and authentic. I am appreciated. I am confident. I am grounded in what I know and what I can do

We choose to believe that each of our readers has experienced in the past or are currently experiencing situations where some of the themes from the righthand, "Reframed" column were present. These situations are also a part of our life journey. How differently would we see ourselves if we shift the attention and energy we pay from the themes associated with the imposter syndrome towards the alternative themes? We wonder what might happen if we start inquiring into these other, stronger experiences and learn from them? Would we create more opportunities to shine authentically as our stronger and shinier selves?



Naming the 'newly born' phenomenon

As AI practitioners, we know that words create worlds, as reflected in the Constructionist principle. Thus, as we identified what we wanted people to

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It's time to turn the 'Imposter Syndrome' upside down. Let's find an appreciative flip!

experience more of, we realised we needed a new term. We sought a term that was inspiring and empowering, that would signify our reframed themes – those we wanted to discover and foster in ourselves and in others. We needed a term that would make us feel more empowered in our professional lives and help us show more of our true, fullest potential.

To the best of our knowledge, a specific term for this collection of desirable themes has not yet been identified. We started by reflecting on the terms we use in our respective languages and cultures to signify positive, shiny moments and hidden talents being revealed to the world. We explored many possible terms in the languages we speak (English, Chinese, Hebrew and French) and also consulted with people within our network. We wanted to expand our horizons and identify interesting and useful options.

Et voilà!

Our quest for a life-giving name resulted in what we refer to as "the True-Colours Phenomenon". We deliberately chose the word "phenomenon" because it is more neutral than "syndrome". A syndrome connotes illness or a disorder of some sort. The term phenomenon simply refers to something that is observable; another definition, though, is of a remarkable person, someone with extraordinary skills. In fact, Clance & Imes used the word "phenomenon" in their original research (1978), so our choice pays homage to the original term that sparked our imagination!

The True-Colours Phenomenon is a set of thoughts, feelings and behaviours with which we can connect. It supports us in embracing our self-worthiness and enables us to reveal our true, unique qualities, talents and creative best. It also frees us from limiting beliefs so that we can pursue new opportunities to the fullest.

It is an intentional choice of seeing ourselves for/ honouring who we truly are rather than comparing ourselves with others or with their perceived expectations.

This new name and our proposed definition did not only come from intellectual co-creation: it also came from personal experience and reflection. So, the phenomenon is alive in us, the authors!

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Change begins from the moment we ask a (different) question. Discovering and activating our true colours through generative inquiry.

Finding our True Colours

Now we have a name and know the power of experiencing our own true colours. We would like to give you, our readers, a parting gift, one small way to take this concept a step further and apply it to yourself by actually discovering some of your own sparkling, true colours. Remember – what you focus on and inquire into will grow and become a greater part of your reality. The following sample AI questions, carefully selected from a much larger collection, might be useful to reflect on in your generative colourful journey:

Past high moments	Present strengths and resources	Future aspirations
When in the past were you able to grow into a role or a specific opportunity you were offered (i.e., you learned what you needed to know along the way)? What kept you going during the journey along that learning curve?	What parts of your current work feel authentic, fully aligned with who you are, your qualities or your credentials? What areas, however small or seemingly insignificant, do you feel confident and grounded in?	Suppose that while you sleep tonight, a miracle happens … suddenly you transform into a sparkling version of yourself … what difference will you notice first when you wake up? What would others notice? What else?

Perhaps just reading through these questions has already raised some inspiring ideas for you. Maybe you want to stop and reflect further on the answers to the questions above.

When we first came up with these questions, we took some time to reflect on our own unique experiences, too, resulting in the renewed versions of our stories.

Our True Colours Stories

Vivien's story

My True-Colours story is a love story unfolded through this mesmerising reframing experience. I'm an organisational psychologist, OD practitioner, executive coach, board member, author, speaker, international collaborator, supporter to non-for-profit organisations, friend, wife, mother, sister and sister-in-law, daughter, daughter-in-law, and daughter of God … Learning to

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recognise and to trust that I am 'more than enough' is a process of being 'in love' with myself and people around me.

Through this reframing experience, I finally came to understand the true meaning of being an instrument of change. Listening to the quiet, little voice in me, I asked: What was I given? What path has the first half of my life laid which has shaped me as who I am today? What are the real longings implanted in me? What and who do I truly love?

I re-connected and had deep, meaningful dialogues with the people and the tribes I love. I undertook new trials of many magnificent things I had never done before. I accepted invitations to stunning opportunities I had not even dreamt of. And, most importantly, I came to believe that I have been given the true colours to embrace all these opportunities that come to me, that I was wonderfully created with a great plan in my life. I am thankful, I am colourful.

David's story

One enduring and deeply meaningful True Colours experience in my life was my journey of the creation and invention of a strength-based approach to Lean Six Sigma. It started with discovering the potency of Appreciative Inquiry. It challenged every strongly held assumption I had about driving change or improvement. It also gave me energy and motivation to change the ways I was working and to inspire others to do the same.

A two-minute conversation with Jane Magruder Watkins planted the seed of a possibility that combining AI and Lean Six Sigma could become a reality. It also planted another seed of inspiration and a sense that this could be an opportunity for me to grab with both hands: no one else had done it before. It still amazes me to see how these potent seeds, nourished with attention, focus, drive, creativity and many inspirational interactions with other positive, thought-provoking and open-minded colleagues, resulted in creating a new practice, writing a book about it, supporting several clients in finding innovative approaches to business improvement and publicly speaking about the topic in numerous conferences and events. While my "auntie" was probably lurking in the shadows throughout, it was, indeed, a magnificent experience of my own true colours.



Our surprises and hopes

There are true colours inside each of us. They have always been a part of us. Sometimes we just need the courage to let them show; sometimes we need someone to help us find them. We would love to see this topic grow and glow.

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The Appreciative Inquiry's poetic principle offers us infinite opportunities to reframe the words we use and the world we live in.

We hold the vision that people will feel comfortable recognising and talking about their true colours proudly. With that we have a few hopes:

- We hope that you will be inspired to discover and fully live out your true colours.
- We hope that by living out your true colours, you will also spread the positive influence to people around you so that they are ignited and inspired to live out their true colours. Starting with a focus on your own true colours will help you support others in finding theirs!

Our journey of reframing the impostor syndrome yielded some surprises. The biggest surprise is that the new True-Colours Phenomenon turned out to be much wider and shinier than we had imagined. It potentially offers many more ways to grow and develop ourselves. In fact, these days the two of us often forget about the existence of the impostor phenomenon altogether.

And having gone through this life-giving and empowering experience of reframing and discovery, we also wondered what else might be possible? There are other terms that have generated great attention and spawned positively intentioned products and services aimed at expanding our awareness and reducing potentially negative impact, such as unconscious bias, burnout, stress management, bullying, and collective trauma (which has come to more prominence with Covid-19). Just like the impostor syndrome, we do not deny these are real phenomena with potentially grave impacts. Yet, we wonder whether a reframed focus and inquiry of some of these terms could serve us and others far better in generating effective ways forward by focusing us on what we want more of in ourselves and the world around us.

Maybe we are heading to another surprising reframing experience?

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