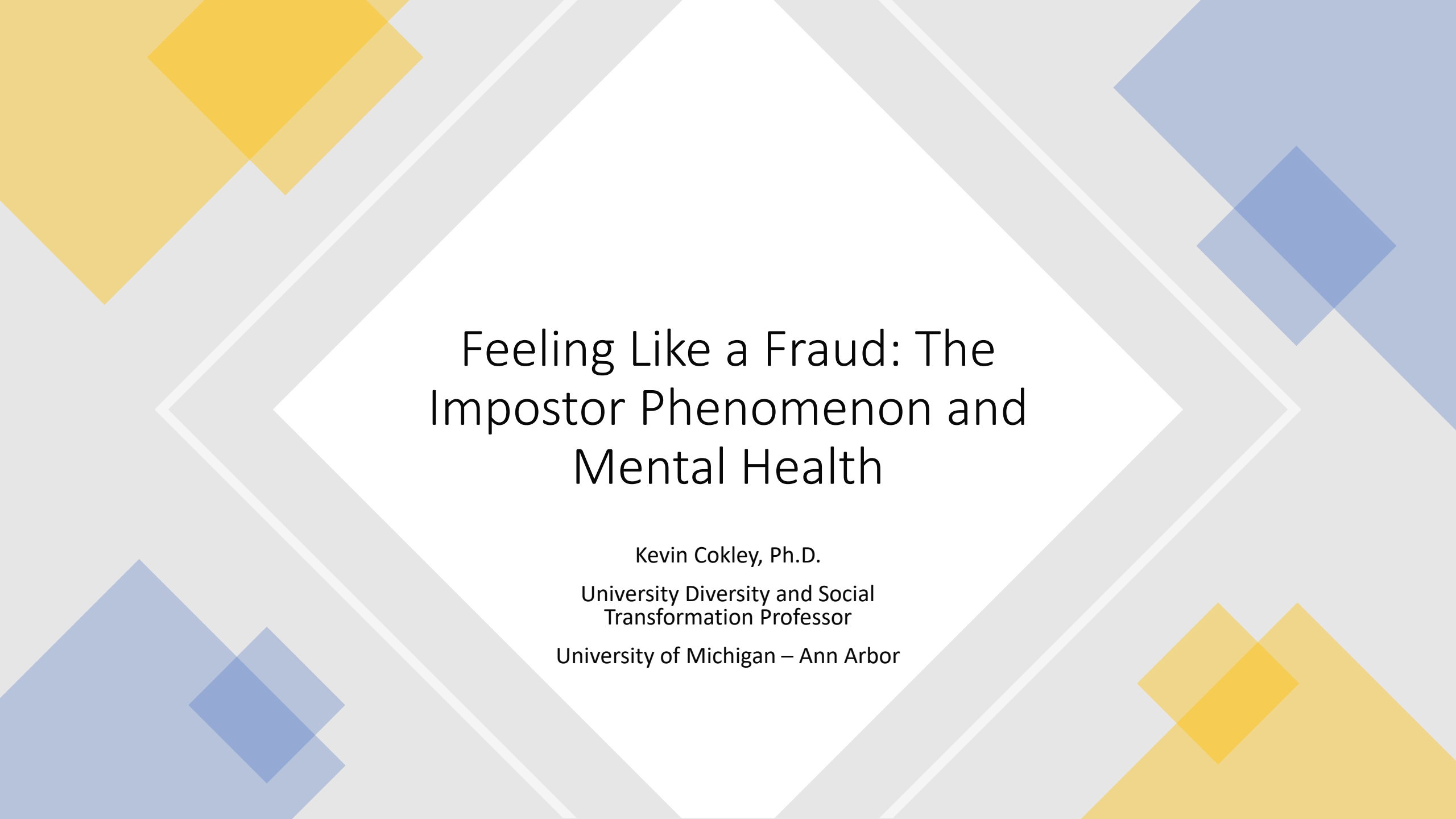




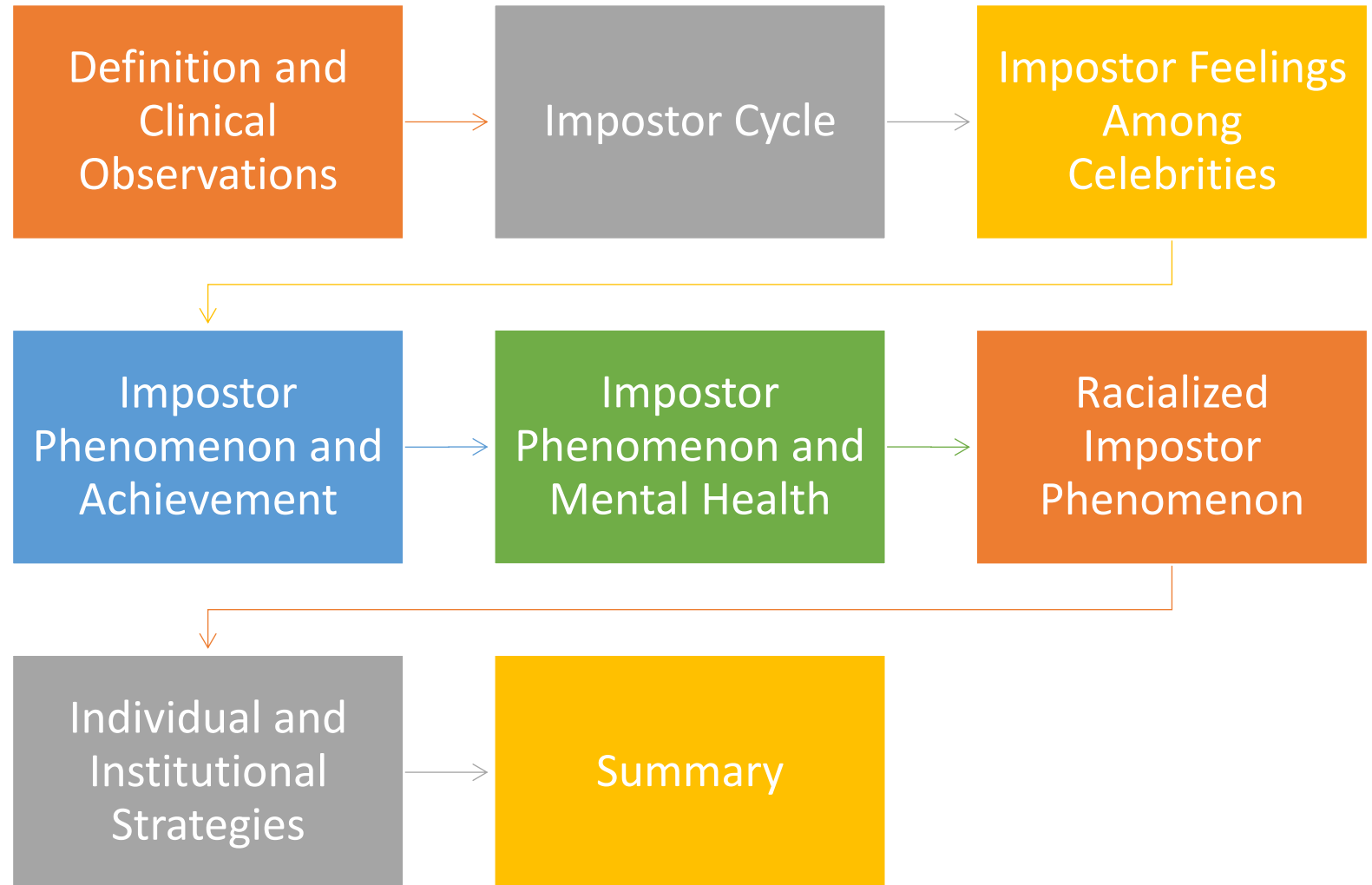
Feeling Like a Fraud: The Impostor Phenomenon and Mental Health

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OUTLINE OF TALK



Woman, in the crown of a queen, looks in the mirror, doubts herself, while viewing her medals, trophies, and diplomas.



Impostor Phenomenon

- Impostor Phenomenon is the experience among academically or professionally successful individuals of feeling like intellectual frauds
- Estimated that 80% of people have experienced feelings of impostorism





Clinical Observations

Rarely stated as a presenting problem

Believe themselves to not be intelligent

No experience of internal sense of success

Considered themselves to be impostors

Clinical Observations

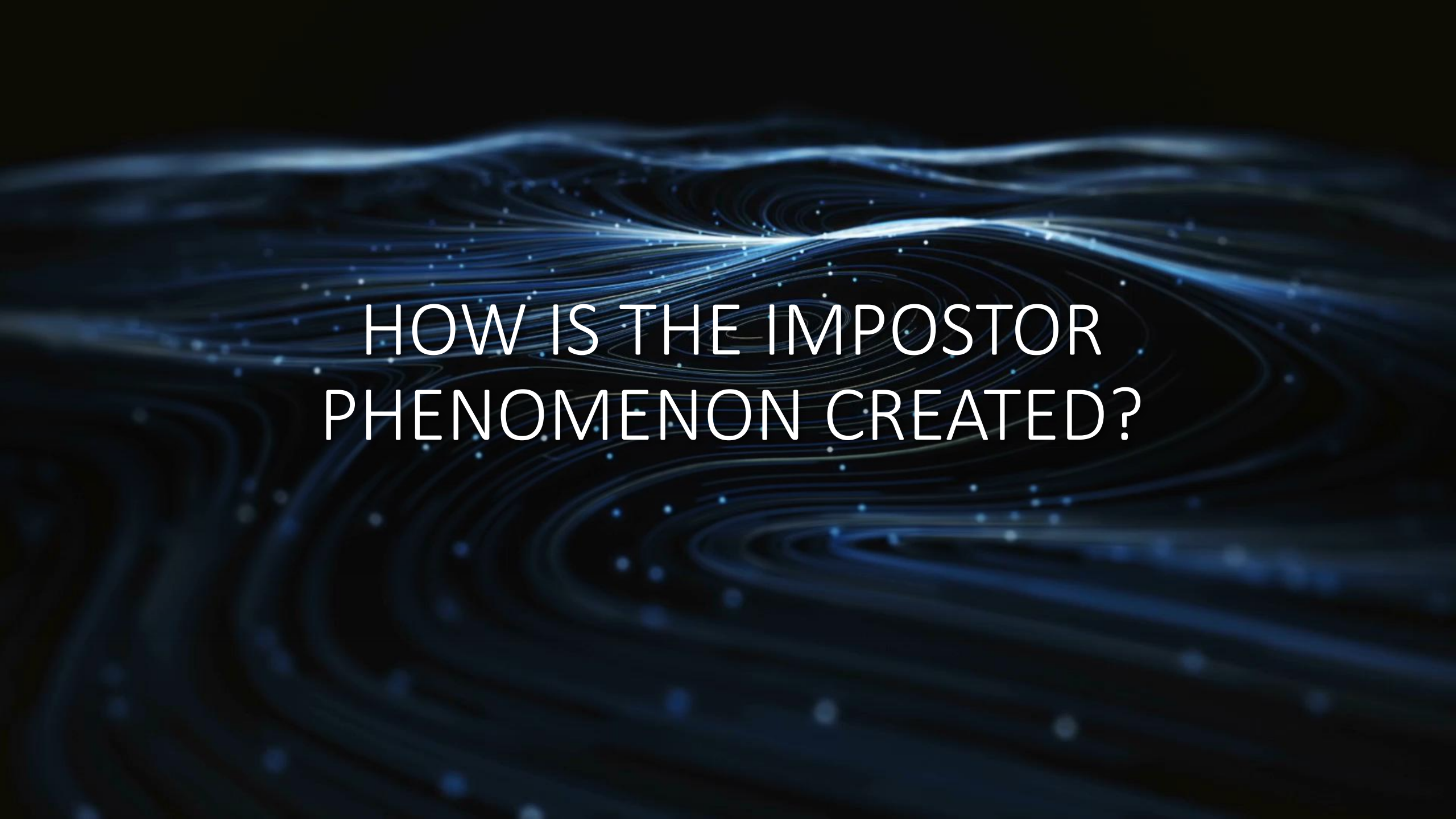
Feel overvalued by
colleagues

Repeated successes
did not break the cycle

Is the Impostor Phenomenon a Disorder?

- It is important to note that while the impostor phenomenon is recognized as an important clinical phenomenon, it is not a recognized psychiatric disorder (which is one of the reasons I like to avoid referring to it as the impostor syndrome). There are some people who believe it should be considered for inclusion in the next DSM so that patients who exhibit signs of impostorism can be identified and treated by behavioral health providers.



The background is a dark blue to black gradient, featuring intricate, glowing blue wavy lines that resemble ripples on water or energy waves. Scattered throughout these waves are numerous small, bright blue and white particles, giving the impression of a dynamic, digital, or cosmic environment.

HOW IS THE IMPOSTOR
PHENOMENON CREATED?

INTERNAL FACTORS



INTERNALIZING MESSAGES ABOUT BEING
COMPETENT IN AREAS (E.G., SOCIAL
ADEPTNESS) NOT RELATED TO INTELLIGENCE



SELF-DOUBT ABOUT INTELLIGENCE



LOWER SELF-ESTEEM

EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

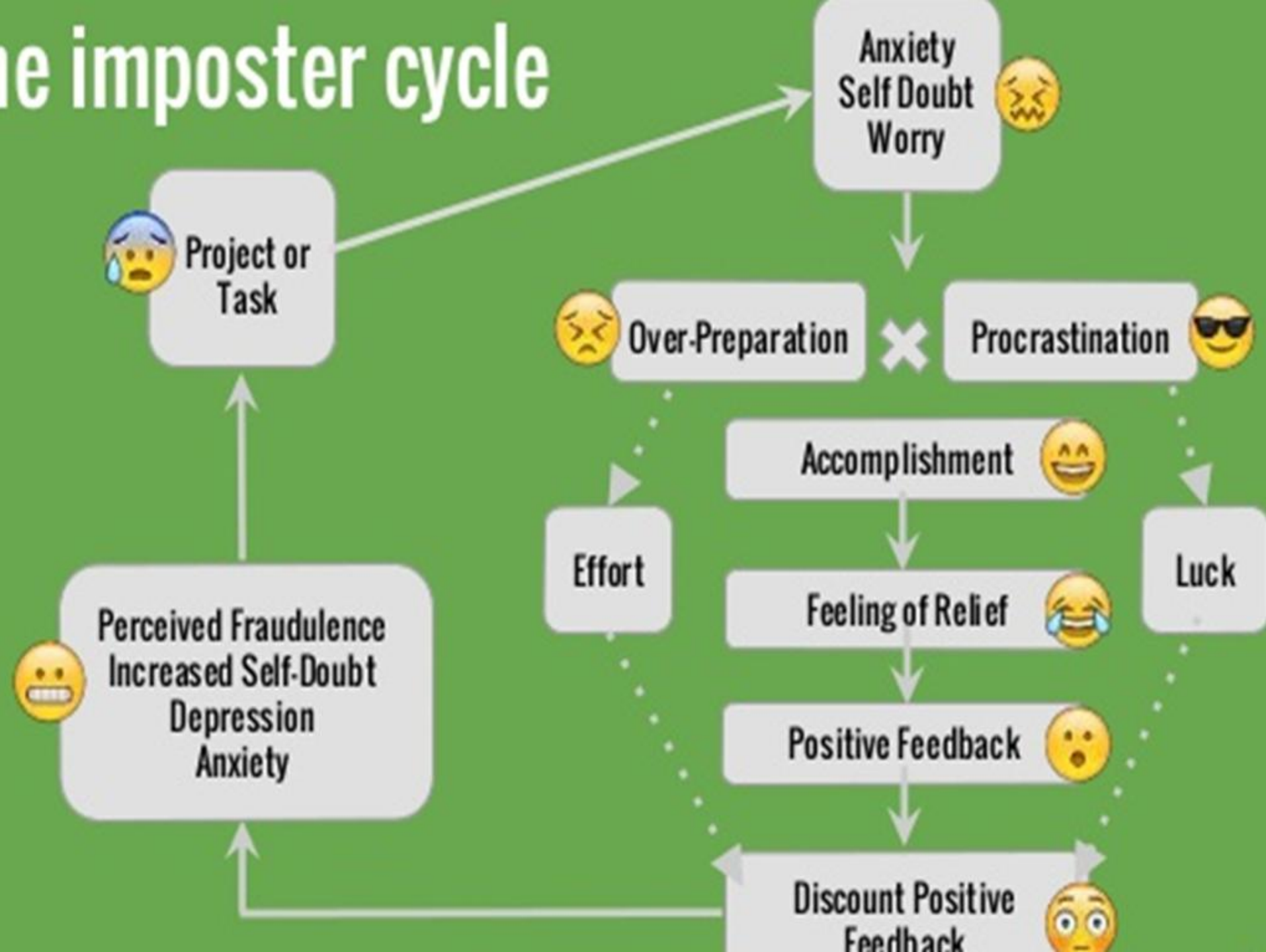
Competitive

High pressure/High
stakes

Being told you're
superior and
struggling to meet
expectations

Being a minority

1.the imposter cycle



Michelle
Obama
Describes Her
Battles with
Impostor
Phenomenon

**The
Guardian**

Viola Davis
Describes Her
Battle with
Impostor
Phenomenon



Impostorism and Achievement

Few studies have investigated the association between impostorism and achievement

Results have been mixed

May affect achievement more for women than men

May have beneficial and/or deleterious effects for women

Impostorism and Achievement

Negative associations at school

Undergraduate women less likely to enroll in honors courses than men

After learning about IP, more women enrolled in honors courses

Impostorism may prevent women from excelling more than it does men

Clance, P. R., & O'Toole, M. A. (1987). The imposter phenomenon: An internal barrier to empowerment and achievement. *Women & Therapy*, 6(3), 51-64.

Learning While Black

- Stone, S., Saucer, C., Bailey, M., Garba, R., Hurst, A., Jackson, S., Krueger, N., & **Cokley, K.** (2018). Learning while Black: A culturally informed model of the impostor phenomenon for Black graduate students.
- Themes:
 - Awareness of low racial representation
 - Questioning intelligence
 - Expectations
 - Psychosocial costs
 - Explaining success externally





Awareness of Low Racial Representation

- “I felt like my program is very hesitant to talk about race or even the fact that I’m the only Black person in the program. Like when I bring it up, everyone gets uncomfortable. And I’m like okay, you guys clearly chose this for a reason, but when I bring it up it makes you uncomfortable.”

Expectations

- “Where I’m from not that many people do well educationally so there’s a responsibility that comes with once you make it from one status to another status or a higher status...Now these people are looking at you too, as an example, as that role model...You think I’m doing something great, but I’m just this kid trying to make things happen.”



Questioning Intelligence

- “When I got accepted [to graduate school], I received a fellowship. And once I found out that no one in our program received the same kind of fellowship I received, and that my fellowship had ‘diversity’ in the title, that made me feel like it didn’t have anything to do with how smart I was, but the fact that I was the only Black person in my program. That probably heightened the IP. And I felt like everyone in my program probably knew I received that fellowship.”



Psychosocial Costs

- “On my first day in the program, I thought maybe the other Black female students didn’t show up (laughter), but then by day four, I realized I was literally one of two Black women.” I was sad and I was really lonely.”
- “I remember, like, if I got called on in class or another Black student got called on in class...the evil eye I would give them if they were not on their stuff [i.e., prepared to answer the question adequately.] I was just kind of like “how dare you?” “There’s like five of us [Black students] in on this whole class. How dare you not be prepared?”





Explaining Success Externally

- “I pray a lot. I pray more than I’ve ever prayed before.”
- “He [God] brought me this far.”
- “I pray a lot so a lot of my success I attribute to God too, cause sometimes I’m like I don’t know how I performed well on this exam or paper, or any of that.”



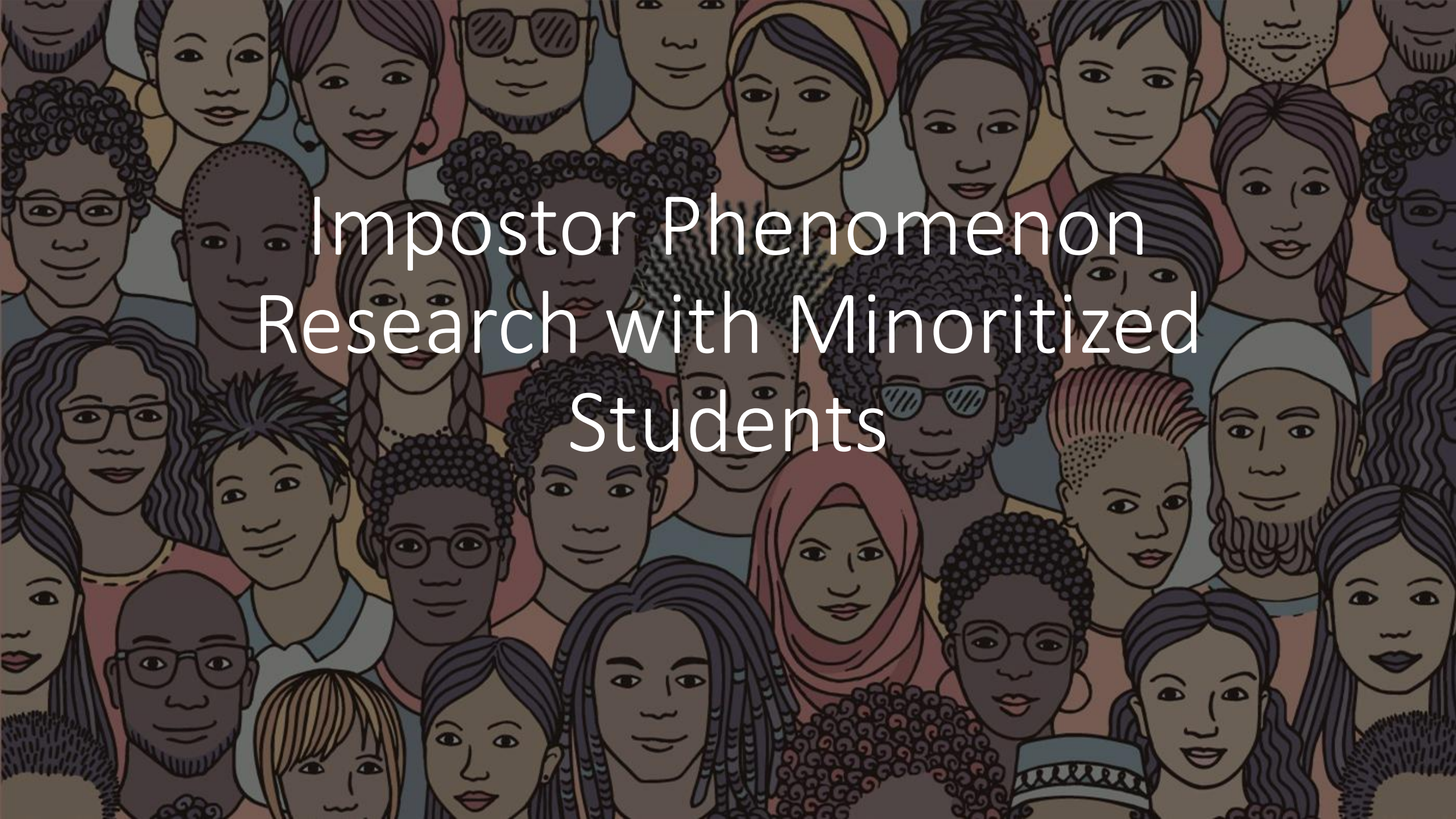
WHAT PERFECTIONISM LOOKS LIKE IN IMPOSTOR SYNDROME?

@drorbeaustin

- Overthinking tasks to avoid mistakes
- Criticizing yourself for making mistakes
- Setting unrealistic expectations for yourself and others
- Comparing yourself to others who you believe are perfect
- Procrastination because you are overwhelmed by the size, visibility, or significance of a task
- Refusing to compromise when you believe there is a "right" way
- Feeling paralyzed to act because you feel too much pressure to complete the task perfectly

Maladaptive Perfectionism

Cokley, K., Stone, S., Krueger, N., Bailey, M., Garba, R., & Hurst, A.(2018). Self-esteem as a mediator of the link between perfectionism and the impostor phenomenon. *Personality and Individual Differences*. 135, 292-297.



Impostor Phenomenon Research with Minoritized Students



Impostor Feelings and Mental Health

- African American students reported significantly higher minority status stress than Asian American and Latino/a American students
- Asian American students also reported significantly higher IP than African American and Latino/a American students
- Cultural pressures of high parental expectations and stressor of being model minority may contribute to higher IP feelings among Asian American students
- Impostor feelings were stronger predictors of mental health than minority status stress
- IP was a significant predictor of depression and anxiety for African American and Asian American students but not Latino/a students

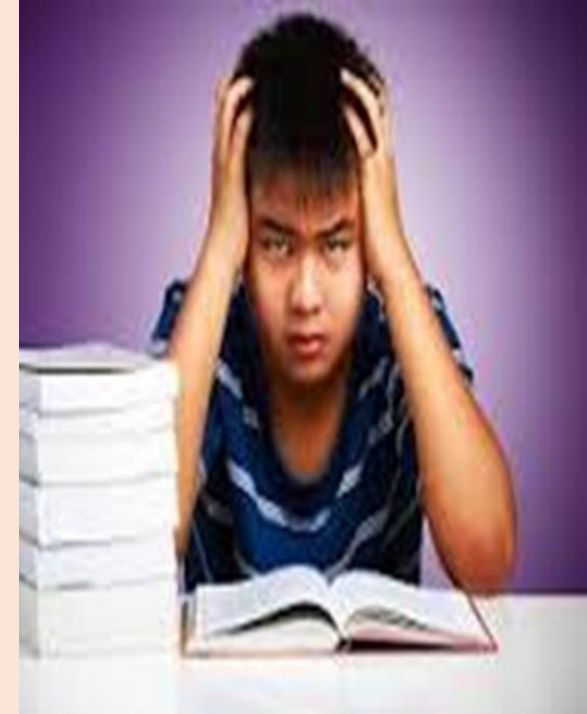
Cokley et al. (2013). An examination of the impact of minority status stress and impostor feelings on the mental health of diverse ethnic minority college students. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 41, 82-95.



Impostor Feelings, Perceived Discrimination and Mental Health

- African American students reported higher perceived discrimination than Asian American and Latino/a American students
- No racial/ethnic group differences for impostor feelings
- Among all students, impostor feelings partially explained perceived discrimination -> anxiety
- Stronger impact of impostor feelings on depression among African American students and stronger impact of perceived discrimination among African American students compared to Asian American and Latino/a American students

Cokley et al. (2017). Impostor feelings as a moderator and mediator of the relationship between perceived discrimination and mental health among racial/ethnic minority college students. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 64, 141-154.





Impostor Feelings Among People of Color



- People of color often must overcome significant challenges, including
 - Lack of representation
 - Racially hostile workplaces
 - Marginalization
 - Discrimination from peers
- 

Do I Belong?

- Moreover, these experiences can challenge ethnic minorities' sense of belonging and contribute to feeling less competent and less prepared, all of which are features of the impostor phenomenon
- I call this a racialized form of the impostor phenomenon



Summary Points

Few studies have examined the impostor phenomenon (IP) in racially and ethnically minoritized groups. These studies have found that IP is prevalent in these groups.

The initial conceptualization of IP does not capture manifestations across racially and ethnically diverse groups.

Current conceptualizations of IP do not reference racism, perceived discrimination and other contextual level predictors of IP among minoritized populations.

The impostor phenomenon needs to be reconceptualized as a racialized IP that captures persistent beliefs, actions, and feelings of intellectual and professional self-doubt among racially/ethnically minoritized people due to experiences and systems of racial oppression and inequity.

Cokley, K., Bernard, D., Stone-Sabali, S., & Awad, G. (2024). Impostor Phenomenon in Racially/Ethnically Minoritized Groups: Current Knowledge and Future Directions. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, 20:1.

Individual Strategies to Address Impostor Feelings

Document	Document your successes
Own	Own your accomplishments
Talk	Talk to a colleague or friend
Learn	Learn from your mistakes
Seek	Seek treatment for mental health

Institutional Strategies to Address Impostor Feelings



Presence of retention and support programs



Providing mentors for students



Teachers must address climate issues



Having senior leadership establish safe climate of transparency



Prioritize increasing student diversity

Summary

A majority of people have experienced impostor feelings

Women and people of color are especially susceptible to impostor feelings

Summary

Susceptibility of people of color to impostor feelings is related to representation and often being a minority in the classroom

High impostor feelings are associated with poorer mental health, including depression and anxiety

Summary

- Impostor feelings are not a life sentence. Individual and institutional strategies can be used to successfully combat them.

Edited by
KEVIN COKLEY



The
IMPOSTOR
PHENOMENON

Psychological Research, Theory,
and Interventions





Cokley, K. (March, 2024). It's Time to Reconceptualize What "Imposter Syndrome" Means for People of Color. Harvard Business Review.

