Impostor Syndrome, a Reparative History

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Abstract

This is an attempt to insert the stories we tell about fear and shame into a history of twentieth-century psychology and its obsession with achievement and modernization. It is an attempt to write an affective history of achievement at the turn of the millennium - and to make this feeling history. Impostor Syndrome is a pop-psychological diagnosis, employed to explain the low presence of women in STEM fields, business and academic administration and 'thought leadership' in the pubic sphere. The article follows the intellectual lineage of two precursors of Impostor Syndrome, Fear of Success and the Impostor Phenomenon. It argues that the grouping of gender/ race/ success/ affect was a keystone of twentieth-century American psychology and development theory. The history of this feeling has consequences for thinking about situated knowledge, realism and epistemic justice.

Keywords

impostor syndrome; fear of success; impostor phenomenon; reparative history; realism; feminism; psychology; modernization

Introduction

In its 1971 inaugural issue, *Ms.* magazine interviewed a young Harvard professor of psychology named Matina Horner. She described this nightmare:

> Look, when I was up for my prelims, I went into a state of anxiety like nothing I'd ever known before. I carried on so I frightened my husband and finally, in desperation, he yelled at me: "For God's sake, maybe women shouldn't be in graduate school!" Now, what was I afraid of? I had designed my own prelim, I knew everything I was responsible for. There wasn't the remotest possibility of failure; and yet, I was shaking, throwing up, screaming I was stupid and now they'd all know I was stupid (quoted in Gornick 1971, 52).

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Horner dedicated her research career to what she called the Fear of Success. Today's popular literature labels such a feeling "Impostor Syndrome." This feeling is mobilized to explain the low presence of women in STEM fields, corporate boards, academic administration and "thought leadership" in the public sphere.

A pop-psychological diagnostic, a label—Impostor Syndrome—opens an entryway to history. Impostor Syndrome points to a feeling—or rather a cluster of associated names, concepts, practices and affects—that has a history. A history of diagnoses and prescriptions, surveys and clinical reports, biographies and myths. This article is an attempt to insert the stories we tell about fear and shame into a history of twentieth-century psychology and its obsession with achievement and modernization. It is an attempt to write an affective history of achievement at the turn of the millennium.

I begin this history from the standpoint of embodied experience, with the dangers of blindness, presentism and narcissism it comports. A couple of years ago I read an article about Impostor Syndrome in *Slate* magazine and saw myself reflected in it: Winona Ryder has it too? Maria Klawe, President of Harvey Mudd College? Margaret Chan, Director of the WHO? Really? This standpoint poses a problematic I cannot easily escape: despite subscription to feminist social theory and a critical understanding of the production of knowledge, a fear persists. Even a terror. This calls for explanation.

The Impostor Syndrome struck a nerve. Perhaps because it described an interpretive, affective gap between my cultural work, my projections onto others, and my internal sense of self. Impostor Syndrome put words—a diagnosis—to my recurrent feelings of failing and faking. Although I never expected to use this phrase in academic writing and likely would recoil if I ever read it, the Impostor Syndrome felt real.

What feels real to me in this story? The affects of early childhood formation, my feelings as a daughter and as a mother and the unfolding from child to adult. I admit that I identify with the psychological type of the Impostor Syndrome: a girl marked at an early age for success and frustrated that it hasn't all gone as smoothly as promised. From a very early age my mother established as fact that a PhD would be required to successfully navigate a sexist world. All of the exclusions and differences that went into such marking and making reinforce my certainty that my social position is a pure function of luck. I wonder if my self is in fact false, and what that means. Psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott's phrase, "the annihilation of the self" feels like perhaps the only adequate description of the terror connected to self-exposure in cultural productions (Winnicott 1965, 143). A terror—completely out of measure with any objective uncertainty or menace—that feels very unfortunately real.

When I presented an early version of this work to an academic colloquium, one questioner became very upset with my treatment of the true and the false. On what grounds, he asked, did I reject the methodology of achievement psychology while seeming to cling to the truth value of psychoanalytic theory? On what grounds did I distinguish truth and falsehood? What was my principle of realism? I could only answer with an affect: I am anxious about this question. This work is a reflection of and on that anxiety.

Other participants at the same colloquium expressed concerns around a similar theme: am I trying to debunk the Impostor Syndrome? Am I questioning the validity of this experience and this self-diagnosis? Does calling out the history of Impostor Syndrome just add another delusion to expose? Does this project help or hinder those of us struggling to manage our affects in a high achievement world?

I wonder why the reality of feeling became a central problem for me, for the psychologists in this story, for my audience. Why is the question of realism still loaded with affect, long after the old battles of the social constructivists and realists have lost purchase and urgency? This seems to me another way of posing the central concern of this project: the fear and anxiety that come with announcing partial truths, situated knowledges. The shame, which goes with projecting one's self into a cultural sphere. The suspicion that what I know and make, because it is as small and partial as I am myself, is false or fraudulent.

Perhaps the strength of terror is a sign of the stakes involved. It is telling us that knowledge making is a serious game. We are responsible to the people and things of knowledge, to truth, justice and saying the right words at the right time. The history of this feeling has consequences for thinking about situated knowledge, realism and epistemic justice.

The history of Impostor Syndrome is a history of experts who claim to expose the truths behind false feelings and appearances. I do not wish to replicate this act of exposure with yet another flavor of revelation, the historical genealogy. So goes the promise of revelation: if only you knew what lay behind your impostor feelings, these fears would melt away under the light of truth. Once you read this article, the Impostor Syndrome will appear a mere historical construct and its affective power will deflate. Somehow I don't see this happening. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2002) says, the promise of exposure has been oversold.

To expose what is "really behind" Impostor Syndrome, to reveal its historical dark side, seems insufficient and unsatisfying. It does not seem enough to show that Impostor Syndrome has some sexist, racist, imperialist roots. As Sedgwick suggests, a paranoid stance often forecloses more than it opens. Paranoid people are never surprised; it's always as bad as they had expected (Sedgwick 2002, 90).

Instead of a paranoid history, this is an attempt at a reparative history. What would it mean to repair this story, to make a reparative history? Repair tends to revolve around a desire to heal the self through the care of others. This article on Impostor Syndrome certainly started that way.

A reparative history might name the inheritances of the Cold War military-industrial-academic infrastructure, of technocratic feminism, of motivation psychology, of slavery, as constitutive of me, the situated twenty-first-century white woman American academic. I work at a public institution whose leaders tout its diversity. I am emotionally and professionally invested in a certain optimism around social mobility through academic achievement. Yet queer people and people of color on campus, among others, live through forms of precarity that challenge the institution and its diversity optimisms (Ahmed 2012). I am shaped by these achievement-oriented worlds, of which I am a product and an agent. They may produce anguish and discomfort but I live in the discomfort, attend to it. I recognize the power of motivation

psychology and therapeutic attempts to foster fearlessness and self-affirmation. I am not innocent in this process. I cannot walk away from the rubbish pile. I wonder whether repair, recycling and reassembly are viable alternatives.

I am inspired by Nicolas Long and Henrietta Moore's theoretically generous and ethnographically situated approach to the social life of achievement: "An enquiry into the social life of achievement… demands that we interrogate the factors and processes that underpin the specific ways in which achievement has become an aspect of particular human subjects' imaginative and fantasmic engagements with self and others"(Long and Moore 2013, 5). I like that Long and Moore engage with fantasy and feeling at specific sites of engagement. Their phrasing, which gives emotion a social life, rings true. Above all their formulation offers the possibility of an open engagement with the misogyny, racism and imperialism inherent in modernizing affects.

Need for Achievement

Why did women's feelings about achievement appear in the 1960s and 1970s to Matina Horner, *Ms.* magazine and many others as a pressing problem to solve? Why did the entanglement of gender, success and affect present a knot needing to be unraveled? Horner's Fear of Success offered answers to a problem formulated by psychologists two generations earlier (Horner 1973b). In following Horner's intellectual lineage we perceive that the grouping of gender/ race/ success/ affect was a keystone of twentieth-century American psychology and development theory.

In 1971, two years before Horner was named President of Radcliffe College, *Ms.* magazine explained the origins of her research:

> Seven years ago, Matina Horner… was as puzzled as the men in her department by the irregular and disturbing results that came exclusively from female subjects. All sorts of data based on information given by the men were successfully fed into the carefully worked-out test model, but when it came to the women, the model went crazy…Bewildered and dissatisfied, the psychologists reluctantly dismissed the women's data as indicating a hopeless "will to fail," impossible to cope with in achievement-motivation work (quoted in Gornick 1971, 50).

Horner and her colleagues studied what postwar American psychologists called the "need for Achievement (*nAch*)," that is, the drive to succeed. Need for Achievement describes a feeling—a need, a motivation—as the universal source of cultural and economic development. Psychologists tracked feelings by recording and scoring their subjects' stories, fantasies, unconscious dreams and imaginings. The notion of need—or drive or motivation, which were used interchangeably with need—was a key concept for translating between individual feelings and cultural development. Needs motivate people. They push people to perform new tasks, start new businesses, explore new fields of knowledge and to seek out new opportunities. Individual and

cultural advancement rely on the propulsive force of needs. Need for Achievement (*nAch*) stood in for a theory of cultural modernization.

To measure their subjects' *nAch*, psychologists employed a version of the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) created by Harvard psychologist Henry Murray in the 1930s. Murray designed the TAT to evaluate the components—the needs and motives—of a persona. TAT subjects were shown images, reproductions of magazine photographs representing people in situations related to the motive being measured. The images were intended to provoke certain motives, to elicit free associations, feelings, thoughts and attitudes about past events related to themes in the photographs. Expert evaluators scored the subjects' stories, feelings and fantasies with an eye to measuring the subjects' needs and motivations.

Horner's doctoral advisor, John W. Atkinson, and his mentor, David McClelland, worked out a standardized rating system to measure indicators of the *nAch* in their subjects' fantasy stories. The fantasy life of subjects with high *nAch*, their thoughts and unconscious dreams, contained imagery of evaluation, performance and success. The TAT test manipulated its subjects' achievement motive in a standardized fashion, which could be measured and correlated with ethnicity, nationality, religious affiliation and social class. Navajos and Brazilians, McClelland noted, "change [their stories] in exactly the same ways under the influence of achievement arousal" as young American boys (McClelland 1961, 43).

Psychologists discovered that the *nAch* test results lined up neatly with the cultural paradigm of a postwar white American male. "What good does it do us," McClelland asked, "to know that a person's *n Achievement* score is high?" The answer: "American males with high *n Achievement* come more often from the middle class than from the lower or upper class, have better memory for uncompleted tasks, are more apt to volunteer as subjects for psychological experiments, are more active in college and community activities, choose experts over friends as working partners, are more resistant to social pressure…." (McClelland 1961, 43). McClelland and his colleagues showed that men with high *nAch* recognize achievement-related words more quickly and complete verbal and arithmetic tests more efficiently than those with low *nAch* (McClelland and Liberman 1949; Lowell 1952). Finally, men with strong achievement motives tend to seek out opportunities to prove themselves. Achievement motivation, McClelland asserted, offered a key for understanding economic progress and development.

The problem was how to fit women into a psychological model of achievement shaped in the image of a white, middle-class young man. This problem extended beyond the psychology of needs and drives. Feelings about success appeared as an index for a general orientation toward entrepreneurialism, self management and capitalism. When McClelland's colleagues tested female college students, they found that women's *nAch* was off the map. Why, then, were they not as successful as their male peers?

Under the supervision of Horner's doctoral advisor, John W. Atkinson, two undergraduates at Wesleyan University in the 1950s carried out a test of achievement motivation in female subjects. To their confusion, the experimenters found that many of their female subjects measured higher levels of achievement orientation than their male subjects. The study authors did not know entirely what to make of evidence that women had higher achievement motivation

than men, yet were inferior performers in the social field of modernization. Female students performed at high levels on *nAch* tests and their results remained constant regardless of the experimental setup. Their inner lives, seemingly, were not carried outward and forward as psychological modernization theories predicted.

Female subjects did not respond to any of the experimental techniques, which had been assumed to hold for all cultures and peoples (as confirmed by results for Navajo and Brazilian boys). The experimenters manipulated the study conditions so as to increase or reduce the incentive for achievement and performance. Whereas the boys responded markedly to experimental incentives, girls did not. When experimenters purposefully tried to lower the stakes and relax their subjects' motivation, female students still responded with exceptionally high levels of *nAch*. "The pattern of achievement-related thoughts reflected in the thematic apperception of girls in both conditions is like that of the boys in the Achievement Orientation condition" (Veroff et al. 1953, 112). In other words, even "relaxed" female subjects showed higher motivation levels than their male counterparts did under experimentally "aroused" conditions. Girls' *nAch* could not be altered experimentally. Their responses troubled the achievement motivation construct.

Why did women's scores not fit the *nAch* model? Was it because "girls usually tend to be more motivated in the classroom situation than boys" (Veroff et al. 1953, 112)? Atkinson and Veroff cited research suggesting that any classroom testing situation heightened female students' motivation, especially if boys were present. Perhaps a change to a more domestic setting might provide conditions for a successful achievement test? Experimenters repeated a "relaxed'" test of *need for Achievement* inside a women's college dormitory, had a female classmate distribute the test in a casual and informal manner, and told the students not to sign their names. To fully replicate a domestic situation (which they thought would lower achievement motivation) they served tea and refreshments. To no avail. The women subjects' drive to achieve remained higher than that of "relaxed" male peers.

Atkinson and his students noted a second anomaly. Their *nAch* experiment, based on the Thematic Apperception Test, employed "pictures… especially chosen to portray cultural situations in which behavior related to the [achievement] motive might be expected to occur": a woman standing in front of a man's desk holding papers; two men gesturing to each other; an older woman with her arm around a young girl (Veroff et al. 1953, 108). Because they wished to test female responses, the experimenters included "achievement related situations… in which the main character was female" (Veroff et al. 1953, 109). They anticipated that female characters holding papers, mentoring younger women and writing at desks would solicit identifications and fantasies in the female subjects. This, too, did not work as intended. Images of working women produced low levels of achievement fantasy in both boys and girls. Male and female subjects both responded to visual cues of successful men with high levels of achievement feeling, and inversely low levels with cues of successful women.

Female subjects troubled the *nAch* construct. Atkinson and Veroff concluded that the explanation must lie beyond psychology, in the cultural and social field. "This …result is consistent with Mead's discussion of the differentiation of sex roles in the culture to which the Ss

[subjects] belong" (Veroff et al. 1953, 112). Cultural and social dynamics appeared to interfere with women's achievement feelings. This is the puzzle that Matina Horner sought to solve. Horner inserted a new category of feeling into her analysis of women's motivation to achievement: fear. She suspected that women self-edit their own drive to succeed in response to surrounding cultural imagery.

Fear of Success

Horner worked to repair the "major unresolved differences" in the theory of achievement motivation, caused by female subjects' anomalous results (Horner 1973, 158). She followed the lineage of her mentor and her mentor's mentor, John Atkinson and David McClelland. Like them, Horner looked to motives and needs to understand societies and cultures. Fantasies, stories and dreams offered a window onto individual and social dynamics. Horner sought to reconcile the problem of the female exception with the universal ambition of the *nAch* construct.

How to explain the gaps between female and male subjects' need for achievement? Female students possessed high achievement motivation—this was measurably present in Atkinson and Veroff's tests—but these feelings were not being expressed in fantasies around pictures of successful women. Although female subjects' natural, "relaxed" level of *nAch* appeared equal or higher than boys' in the "aroused" state, their feelings appeared to remain internalized. They did not respond to external experimental incentives. Their feelings were not converted into cultural material, as feelings were thought to do. Somehow the operation of *nAch* was blocked or stunted before it could express itself. Horner introduced a variable to explain this blockage: social stereotypes and expectations.

Women may have been raised with high *need for Achievement*, but by high school age, Horner thought, something got in their way. Women's drives and motives were shaped by early childhood experience, as most postwar psychologists believed. But the expression of these needs depended on something else: the social environment of adolescence. "Until recently their families had stressed independence and achievement orientation, factors shown by McClelland to be related to, and in fact to facilitate the development of, achievement motivation itself. Suddenly the young women began to feel the "double bind" in the culture's ambivalence about female achievement" (Homer and Walsh 1973, 128). Prevailing cultural "conceptions of femininity" clashed with these women's childhood training to strive for achievement.

Achievement-oriented women hit a wall: should they follow their desire to achieve, they risked negative social consequences. Women paid a price for this contradiction in anxiety and a "Fear of Success." Horner altered the protocols for psychological tests of *nAch* in order to measure levels of Fear of Success (FOS) in her female subjects. She studied FOS in college and high school co-eds exposed to an image of a successful female role model. Instead of measuring a drive to achieve, Horner measured fantasy imagery around fear:

> It is clear from even these preliminary findings that women are paying a high price for their anxiety about success. Otherwise-able young women are prevented from actively

seeking success; they perform at lower levels in mixed-sex competitive situations, and many who do succeed downgrade their own performances in the presence of males. Career aspirations are lowered, opportunities are narrowed, and, finally faced with the conflict between their feminine image and the development of their abilities and interests, many women simply abdicate from competition in the outside world (Homer and Walsh 1973,   128).

FOS, Horner thought, was most often unconscious. Women appeared unaware of their self-editing in the face of negative consequences. FOS came from a place outside the self and insinuated itself such as to appear natural. "It has taken us a long time to become aware of the extent to which this image of woman has actually been internalized, thus acquiring the capacity to exert psychological pressures on our behavior of which we are frequently unaware" (Horner 1973, 158). When we turn to women, the problem presents itself as one of self-knowledge and the reality of inner feeling.

In this process Horner subtly redefined "achievement." Previous psychological work on *nAch* in boys took it as a measure of a drive to conquer new tasks, a taste for difficult but feasible challenges. Achievement was seen as a quest for accomplishment for its own sake rather than to please or conform. Although they did correlate *nAch* scores with performance on verbal anagram tests, most psychologists seemed rather indifferent to the academic performance of their subjects. They rated *nAch* highly whether the subject fantasized about success or failure. Far more important than good grades, *nAch* represented an individualist drive to find and meet new challenges, regardless of social expectations.

Horner was much more concerned with performance and social evaluation. Her test cues explicitly defined achievement in terms of academic success: they describe a female student "at the top of her class" and another who "has just been chosen as valedictorian." The nature of achievement here is external, quantitative and evaluated. Horner defines achievement in a sense likely more familiar to us today. This kind of achievement comes from outside us, not from within. Achievement responds to a pre-established audit culture. It means getting to the top of the class, the best grades, the highest score.

Wrecked by Success

A classroom in a large co-ed Midwestern University in the year 1964. Matina Horner, then a doctoral student, hands out short texts describing two characters: John and Anne. She instructs the students to quickly write a short story in response to the text—and to make it interesting. The stories, in Horner's reading, become indexes of her subjects' unconscious fantasies and of their cultural orientation towards success. Female students receive this text: "After the first term finals, Anne finds herself at the top of her medical school class" (Homer and Walsh 1973, 126). Males write to the same lead, in which John is substituted for Anne. Here are some female subjects' responses to Horner's story cues:

> Anne is a fiction, an impostor, "a code name for a non-existent person created by a group of med students who take turns taking exams and writing papers for Anne."

> Anne's husband gets her pregnant (he substitutes sugar pills for her birth control) but she returns to her books and lectures an hour after giving birth. "He hits his head against the wall."

> Anne "has a fear of becoming a lesbian…" (Horner 1973, 163-164)

Horner's test results painted a picture of a high-achieving woman with deep affective, maternal and sexual dysfunction. Anne may have been at the top of her class, but her existence as a woman appeared tenuous at best. We find a strange looping of sexuality in the history of Horner's Fear of Success. Anne's script was already written well before she appeared in the experimental classroom: she was queer, sexually and maternally frigid.

Anne, in these stories, appears sexually and maternally abnormal, and an impostor. In the figure of Anne, female achievement was cast as queer social existence and gender malfunction. In this respect the students' stories echoed prevailing psychological theories. Professional, ambitious women were described in the literature as "phallic" (Ovesey 1962, 84).

From the start, psychologists linked achievement inhibition and sexual dysfunction. In 1916 Freud described a type of personality that falls ill as a consequence of success. Like Lady Macbeth, this person is "wrecked by success." Intriguingly, Freud's case studies, with one exception, all revolved around women, sex and marriage. A "typical" case involved a wayward young woman whose lover finally proposed marriage. On obtaining this cherished desire she promptly undermined her fiancé, neglected her house and "soon succumbed to an incurable mental illness" (Freud 1957, 316). Freud located this reaction to success in the "forces of conscience " (Freud 1957, 330). More specifically, Freud described success-illnesses as an Oedipal dynamic. Like all forms of guilt it derived from desire to possess and to destroy one's parents. Oedipal conflicts in childhood filled the ego with guilt, to the extent that it intervened to prevent a wished-for desire from happening. The root of success-illness, for Freud, had to do with frustrated sexual desire for parents. In women, this involved an inability to marry and to reproduce (Lady Macbeth, Freud points out, was barren). In men, the Oedipal dynamic was expressed as a castration complex.

For the most literal-minded Freudians, the formula for success was ridiculously simple: achievement = penis + aggression. In the 1950s psychologist Lionel Ovesey presented men who feared achievement as castrated "pseudohomosexuals," and women who sought achievement as fake men. Fear of success, Ovesey thought, came out of childhood rivalries, feelings of guilt and inhibited aggression. The patient withdraws from competition in order to avoid the "murderous retaliation" of his rivals. This fear was tied up with the "universal destructive fantasies in men,

death, castration and homosexual submission" (Ovesey 1962, 84). Men who feared success identified themselves with femininity and homosexuality.

Freud's cases of "wrecked by success" were almost all women. Ovesey, by contrast, associated the "Fear of Vocational Success" with men, "because they are more subject to the competitive pressures of the culture" (Ovesey 1962, 82). Women driven by a need to achieve became sexually perverse. Their ambition stemmed from childhood competitive rivalries with fathers and brothers. Ambition to achieve marked one as a "phallic women." "The end-product of a competitive failure in a so-called phallic woman is more often than not a castration anxiety. This anxiety may be combined with considerable sexual inhibition and even withdrawal from intercourse because the partner's penis is erroneously perceived as a dangerous weapon" (Ovesey 1962, 84). (I note with curiosity that while Ovesey taught psychology at Columbia University, his wife was an advertising executive.)

Horner despaired that "there appears to be no successful escape" from the stifling influence of cultural conceptions such as these. She warned that the social consequences of frustrated female ambition could be severe. Research showed that women with high Fear of Success appeared to be more likely to turn to marijuana, LSD or speed to dull their frustration. "Unfulfilled abilities, interests, and intellectual potential give rise to feelings of frustration, hostility, aggression, bitterness, and confusion…." (Homer and Walsh 1973, 129).

Horner feared that the problem would get worse: women were having fewer children, partly in response to public no-population growth campaigns. As child-bearing loses its place in women's lives, "it is necessary that other options for enhancing self-esteem be made available" (Homer and Walsh 1973, 130). *Ms.* magazine writer Vivian Gornick put it rather more starkly: "Behind the passive exterior of many women there lies a growing anger over lost energies and confused lives, an anger so sharp in its fury but so diffuse in its focus that one can only describe it as the price society must pay for creating a patriarchal system in the first place, and for now refusing to let it go" (Gornick 1971, 52).

Race and Low Achievement Syndrome

The problem of psychological modernization was a gendered problem. It was a raced problem, too, though race was differently constitutive of psychological modernization theory. Horner's target population for Fear of Success grafted neatly onto previous studies of high achievement-oriented American middle-class white male subjects. Horner reported that white middle-class women appeared most likely to suffer from FOS. She found low FOS in lower class and nonwhite women; these women, she speculated, were so unlikely to succeed that they had no fear of doing so. "After all," she told *Ms.* magazine, "a girl who's not too bright and doesn't have much chance for success to begin with is hardly likely to be frightened by the prospect of success. Whereas, a bright girl from a middle-class home, knowing she actually has it within her possible grasp…." (Horner, cited in Gornick 1971, 51). Frustration was only possible, Horner suggested, if one believes one ought to have what one wants. Women without any chance of success had no reason to fear it. What marked a girl with no chance? Her class and—especially—her race.

The racial other was defined by absence of achievement motives and stimuli. "A recent study (Fleming & Horner) found that black female students produced a 29% incidence of fear-of-success imagery as opposed to the 65-88 % range found in the White female students.… The differences reveal that by achieving success, white women are violating a socially prescribed norm, while black women are not." Horner speculated, "the conception of femininity was different for black and white women" such that success did not challenge black women's self image (Homer and Walsh 1973, 128). However, black women's FOS appeared to be growing higher. Drawing from popular imagery in the 1960s and 1970s of the black matriarch, Horner speculated that the cultural role of black women may be changing. As black women found themselves providing for their men more frequently, Horner thought, their FOS was increasing (Homer and Walsh 1973, 128). In the same gesture, Horner challenged gender-bound categories and reinforced racially-bound categories. The struggle to establish women as subjects of achievement motivation sustained, even reinforced, exclusion by class and especially by race. One constitutive grid of difference—gender—gave way to another—race.

In the modernization theory proposed by achievement motivation psychologists and developed by Horner, gender was a site of cure. Women's emancipation would produce a broad social transformation. The cure could be, as David McClelland imagined, by the unmooring of mothers from traditional values, or, as Horner imagined, by the release of women's social potential. In both cases gender was the site of repair. Race, by contrast, appeared to have no cure. David McClelland explained low rates of *nAch* in African-Americans as the inheritance of a child-rearing style shaped by slavery. Bizarrely, he described slavery as a form of psychological "symbiosis," which lowered the overall social level of achievement motivation in both slaves and slaveholders. He speculated that the rise and fall of civilization might be traced to the historical tendency of wealthy societies to take slaves. Their children, pampered by slaves obliged to satisfy every whim, were incapable of feeling a need to achieve. Likewise, slaves' children lacked an achievement motive, since slavery required pure obedience to survive. Because child-rearing practices passed from generation to generation, psychological decadence continued long after slavery had ended. "Negro slaves should… have developed child-rearing practices calculated to produce obedience and responsibility not *n Achievement*, and their descendants, while free, should still show the effects of such training in lower *n Achievement* – which in fact is exactly the case" (McClelland 1961, 376).

In the 1960s psychology student Ann Dissinger Mingione reported that black students' *nAch* was considerably lower than white subjects' in the Southern United States. "Negro boys' low scores may be explained by the typical, maternally dominated family constellation… which is related to paucity of job opportunities for Negro men" (Minigione 1965, 110). Ronald Nuttall found that black women with high *nAch* were "more likely to join the Negro protest groups" such as NAACP, "thus expressing their strivings through attempts to raise the social status of the entire racial group" (Nuttall 1964, 599). Nuttall also observed that black men with high *nAch* tended to see more white in a perceptual color test, which he interpreted as a form of identification with white people. Mingione later repeated her test in a working-class neighborhood in Boston and found no racial difference (Minigione 1965; Mingione 1968). She

concluded that racial prejudice restrained achievement motivation. She saw little potential for change.

By the 1970s black students' achievement motivation—at the lowest end of the *nAch* scale—was a topic of intense study and concern. Psychologists offered social/structural explanations for the perceived racial disparity in drive to success. African-American students' efforts were neither sustained nor encouraged by the society around them.

Teachers' low expectations and broad social discrimination combined, psychologists thought, to create a state of "learned helplessness" in African-American students. Like the dogs in Maier, Seligman and Solomon's famous aversion experiments—dogs who were so conditioned by shock therapy that they ceased trying to escape—black students had learned not to try at school. "Learned helplessness is an appropriate label for the low achievement syndrome, since persons low in achievement motivation do not perceive that effort influences outcome…. Thus cognitive systems associated with achievement strivings may be learned differentially by various racial or ethnic groups" (Weiner 1972, 210). African-American subjects were seemingly saddled by history with a cognitive system that excluded achievement orientation.

Effects of racialized theories of achievement motivation persist still. Through to the present day, there are two parallel and largely disconnected strands of literature on achievement in the United States: the first, around Impostor Syndrome, describes high-performing women in business, medicine and the academy, and their paralyzing fear of success. The second literature resides in the field of education and addresses the problem of achievement motivation, that is, how to get poor and minority students to want to learn. These educational achievement studies focus on the young African-American child and tend to ignore the adult. Impostor Syndrome, by contrast, is concerned with how to free adult women from the burdens of their childhood. Race weaves through both of these stories, especially since the 1990s as people of color identify and are identified with the Impostor Syndrome. Where educational research takes low minority achievement as a real problem to be countered, psychologists of the Impostor Syndrome take impostorism as a false problem of self-perception, to be corrected. The first case is constitutive and difficult or impossible to cure; the second perceptual and curable.

A Feminist Self-Cure

I started this research as a reparative project of self-cure or self-care for myself and for others, and now I must contend with the non-innocent histories of feminist cures and cares. What are the possibilities of a reparative history; what forms of past, present and future might it foreclose or open? What legacies do the raced and gendered histories of the Impostor Syndrome leave for us to contend with? Can these inheritances become objects of care or repair?

Curing women's misdirected feelings became one of the central preoccupations of postwar technocratic feminists. Technocratic feminists, as historian Laura Micheletti Puaca describes them, wielded the language of national security to argue for greater women's participation in science and engineering. Social misconceptions about women's ability, internalized by women themselves, were damaging the nation's supply of critical scientific

"manpower." "By embracing the language of [military] preparedness, technocratic feminists presented the education, employment and advancement of women as paramount to Cold War manpower needs" (Puaca 2014, 73). At the 1958 Conference for the Participation of Women in Science, Johns Hopkins chemist Betty Lou Raskin assessed women's status in language nearly identical to Horner's later work. Disparities between male and female scientists came not from any "intellectual incompetence or lack of creative ability." Rather, "it is the fault of our cultural conditioning and our poor vocational guidance" (Puaca 2014, 121). Microbiologist Polly Bunting, Horner's predecessor as the Dean of Radcliffe College, blamed a "climate of un-expectation" for the waste of valuable women's talent (Puaca 2014, 148). As historian Michelle Murphy suggests, girls appeared and still appear as an untapped source of human capital, waiting to be liberated. Feminist promissories about young women's locked-up potential value emerged decades before "the Girl" became a "figure of transnational rescue and investment" (Murphy 2012b).

Feminist psychologists took up the project of releasing women's locked-up power as a therapeutic goal. The Impostor diagnosis dates to 1978, when clinical psychologists Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Ament Imes published a description of "The Impostor Phenomenon in High-achieving Women." Drawing upon Matina Horner's work, Clance and Imes formulated the Impostor Phenomenon as a feminist response to the twentieth-century psychology of achievement motivation. They describe a cure for the condition that Horner labeled Fear of Success.

Clance developed a diagnostic test for Impostor Phenomenon (IP), on which respondents note their level of agreement with statements like these:

- 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.

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

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

- 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.

- At times, I feel my success has been due to some kind of luck. (Clance 1985)

A study of the Clance IP Scale identified three factors that account for most of its variation: fakery, luck and discounting (Chrisman et al. 1995). In sum, an IP subject feels like a fake. She attributes her successes to luck and she discounts their significance. This is the core definition of the Impostor Phenomenon.

Like Horner, Clance and Imes identified Impostor Phenomenon as a female problem. "Horner indicates that many women have motive to avoid success out of a fear that they will be rejected or considered less feminine if they do succeed. …for women to succeed in this culture is

indeed a fearsome venture" (Clance and Imes 1978, 5). Men, Clance and Imes believed, tend to attribute their success to internal qualities and capabilities, whereas women "project the cause of success outward to an external cause (luck) or to a temporary internal quality (effort) that they do not equate with inherent ability" (Clance and Imes 1978, 242). Men affected by IP tended to be those "more in touch with their feminine qualities" (Clance and Imes 1978, 241). Psychologists replicating Clance and Imes's work found that men report IP feelings as frequently as women; however, the initial gendering of diagnosis stuck. Clance later suggested that even if feelings may appear at similar rates across the sexes, women suffer more from their effects. "Women are more likely to be limited, and limited more powerfully, by the Impostor Phenomenon"(Clance and O'Toole 1987, 2).

The Impostor Phenomenon took shape through conversations Clance and her collaborator, Suzanne Imes, held with women undergraduates at the Oberlin College counseling center. "Some women were coming in and saying, 'They asked me to do an honors thesis, but I'm not going to, because if I do they're going to find out all I don't know'" (Clance and Ojerholm 1995). Clance connected outsider feelings she had experienced in graduate school with these students' hesitation to put themselves forward or to accept positive evaluation. She and Imes began holding workshops for undergraduate women to work through their impostor feelings, where they encouraged women to put themselves forward with confidence. The Impostor Phenomenon construct emerged from Clance's activist therapeutic work at Oberlin and Georgia State University. Clance and Imes took care to identify the condition as a "phenomenon" rather than a disorder or "syndrome," "because all along it's been very important for us not to have this be another 'defect' in women or a pathologizing of women" (Clance and Ojerholm 1995). (It is interesting to note that the current popular version of Clance's concept—Impostor Syndrome—performs the very pathologization that she had tried hard to prevent.)

For Clance, IP was mainly about self-perception: specifically, self-deception. IP subjects' biggest problem, she thought, was that they were maladjusted to their own reality. "The reality was that the students who were feeling like impostors were among the highest ranked students…. These subjects were ingenious at negating objective external evidence that indicated they were indeed very bright" (Clance and O'Toole 1987, 1). Women with IP block out knowledge of their own success: "On an unconscious level the impostor phenomenon allows a woman to deal with her ambivalence about being successful, by allowing her to keep her achievement out of her awareness" (Clance et al. 1995, 84).

In other words, IP subjects convince themselves of a falsehood, in order to protect themselves from potentially harmful consequences of the truth. In this sense they are practicing deception, as they themselves fear. However, their fabrication, their imposture, happens only within their own minds. They convince themselves that they are someone (an incompetent, a dolt) whom they are not.

In its most basic dynamic, IP involves self-deception. People with IP experience a split between feeling (imposture) and reality (success and achievement). IP subjects believe that they lack qualities of intelligence and competence, despite objective evidence to the contrary. Indeed, as their paper title indicates, Clance and Imes identified IP as a problem specifically experienced

by "high-achieving women." They took achievement as a necessary precondition for IP. Impostor thoughts and feelings functioned to negate successes that had already been attained. The IP diagnosis described a gap between self-awareness and reality.

In an echo of 1970s consciousness-raising groups, Clance designed a group therapy for IP subjects that would foster acceptance of reality. "The client needs to become aware of the superstitious, magical aspects of her impostor belief" (Clance and Imes 1978, 6). Group therapy clients exposed the untruth of each other's self-perceptions, gently correcting negative self-statements, pointing out patterns and inconsistencies. Treating clients with IP, Clance sought to restore truth for self-lies, reality for self-deception.

Pauline Clance's work revolved around individual recognition of the true and collective unveiling of the false. Her cure for an IP subject was to reveal the true and objective self (not the deep, unconscious self but the socially achieving self), to identify with the true self in public and in private. Clance's group therapy allowed the patient to see herself reflected in others and thereby recognize the "magical" and deceptive qualities of the IP story.

Pauline Clance's therapy led women to see through the false and superstitious quality of their own self-deception. Clance and Horner's contemporary, feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan, worked to expose the deceptions inherent in constructs like the *need for Achievement*. Gilligan's cure involved a rejection of the psychological scale itself.

Carol Gilligan represents a sort of common ancestor for contemporary reparative scholarship. With Gilligan, the histories of Impostor Syndrome, *nAch* and motivation psychology fold into histories of care and repair. She was a colleague of David McClelland's at Harvard University beginning in 1967, and cites him extensively in her work. Though her research focuses mainly on moral psychology she has training in achievement motivation. She even collaborated on one of Walter Mischel's famous marshmallow experiments on delayed gratification, which measured correlations between self-control and the *need for Achievement* (Mischel and Gilligan 1964).

In the opening pages of her keystone book, *In a Different Voice*, Gilligan sets her project directly in dialogue with those of David McClelland and Matina Horner. Gilligan quotes McClelland's admission that, "[psychologists] have tended to regard male behavior as the 'norm' and female behavior as some kind of deviation from that norm"(McClelland 1975 cited in Gilligan 2009, 10). For Gilligan, Horner's work offered a cautionary example. When women do not display the same achievement motivation as men, Gilligan notes, Horner finds "something wrong" with her female subjects. Gilligan questions whether the women in *nAch* studies were actually expressing achievement motivation or rather, a distaste for competition. Perhaps female subjects just did not care about achievement. Perhaps Anne did not *want* to be at the top of her medical school class (Gilligan 2009, 12).

Drawing from women's test responses, Gilligan sought to build an alternative worldview. She valorized differences in female and male responses as an index of a different set of values. Whereas male subjects tended to refer to individual rights to justify moral decisions, Gilligan found that her female subjects thought relationally. Women tended to consider the effects of moral actions on others, in a web of close and distant relationships. Female subjects'

moral thinking, she found, referred not to universal rights but to partial, contextual, situated relationships. Gilligan named this situated, relational ethics an *ethics of care*.

One senses that Gilligan, Clance and Horner undertook their research as a form of self-cure. Both Gilligan and Horner replicated the work of their research supervisors (Lawrence Kohlberg and John W. Atkinson) in order to bring women into the picture as positive subjects rather than aberrant results. One might imagine a reader of *Ms.* embracing their advice in concert: feel confident in your judgment as a distinctly feminine style of caring, cure your self of fear and push forward in the world of achievement. Recognize your true worth, evacuate fear, begin to truly live for the first time.

Horner, Clance and Gilligan established the language and the technology of the feminist self-cure: self-awareness and valorization, rejection of prevailing masculine norms and standards, and collective affirmation of a female commonality, the universal "woman." The figure of the Impostor Syndrome comes out of that conjunction, as do the consciousness-raising group therapies designed to cure it. I suggest that the current reparative turn also refers back to this nexus.

A Reparative Turn

My search for a cure ends here. The feminist self-cure for high-achieving anxiety does not offer closure. It opens new questions and anxieties. Michelle Murphy identifies the late twentieth-century feminist self-cure, focused on self-awareness, as a raced project of "self-possession." The feminist self-cure marks a self that is free and available to be cured by its own work; it assumes that the body is healthy, "normal" and autonomous. This kind of cure cannot assimilate race, class and structural violence. Murphy writes, "whiteness—in heralding self-possession—often works to displace attention from the necropolitical work of race" (Murphy 2012a, 44). My desire for a self-cure obscures the inequalities, exclusions and the uneven kinships that structure the problem of anxiety and achievement.

Reparative scholarship offers a positive orientation, a hope to live more fully and feel better. But there is a downside. Feminist scholar Robyn Wiegman calls out the narcissism of reparative reading. She warns against the instrumentality of repair, the seizing upon an object of study as a means to repair the self and to re-establish the value of our own scholarly work (Wiegman 2014, 18). Much reparative scholarship casts research as therapy: asking of the object to sustain our world, to cure us. Eve Sedgwick imagines that a reparative reader would attach to an object and "help himself" (Sedgwick 2002, 115). This one-way transit of feeling ends at an exclusionary cul-de-sac. Sometimes feeling better is just not worth it.

Following Sara Ahmed, Wiegman and Murphy remind us that bad, failed and ugly feelings are critical shields against the unrelenting positive projects of the present (Ahmed 2010; Murphy 2015, 3). Anxiety, depression, discomfort and anger perform important work. They direct our attention to things that need fixing. The urgency of unpleasant feelings, the importance of their resistance to understanding and possession, are what I attach to Donna Haraway's injunction to "stay with the trouble" (Haraway 2010). There is no total cure, no heroic act of

rescue, that can or should make it all go away. If we attend to the trouble, if we stay with it and care for it, there may be bits of life to repair.

In one sense, repair names the awesome task of maintaining stability, the status quo. Of bridging past and future. Of painstakingly sustaining lives and restoring objects. Steven J. Jackson attends to repair as a moral and material attachment to things. He calls on us to replace the shiny patina of innovation studies with studies of repair and "broken world thinking." Jackson evokes "reverence" in the face of "the remarkable resilience, creativity, and sheer magnitude of the work represented in the ongoing maintenance and reproduction of established order" (Jackson 2014, 222). Repair figures as a counterforce to decay, disposal, disruption and opposition. But the workers whose bodies labor in the toxic ruins, culling recyclables with tools of fortune, are not sustained by their repair work. As the byproducts of disposable consumption pile up in toxic ecologies, their devalued work of repair appears ever more urgent and fraught with danger. Jackson expresses both "hope and concern" over the potentials of "a world in constant process of fixing and reinvention, reconfiguring and reassembling into new combinations and new possibilities" (Jackson 2014, 222).

In another sense, repair implies reassembly. Michelle Murphy finds an "ethic of reassembly" at work in late twentieth-century feminist self-help collectives "aspiring to craft protocols that could foster change, move between sites, and be tailored to particular needs as decided by individuals or small groups" (Murphy 2012a, 30). Murphy notices many non-innocent reassemblages of women's health care, many of which are in urgent need of repair. In that same late twentieth-century moment, Donna Haraway wrote that we are all, objects and people, "reasonably thought of in terms of disassembly and reassembly" (Haraway 1989, 186). Perhaps a reparative history is a reassembly of the problem into something that we can work with.

As Maria Puig de la Bellacasa reminds us, to work with care is to reassemble what is broken, damaged or hurtful. Caring is a "transformative ethos" that works to make livable worlds. Care reshapes things. In a caring or careful account, "critical cuts should not merely expose or foster conflict but should produce caring relations" (de la Bellacasa 2011, 97). For every critical cut, she reminds us, we must form a reattachment. The work of caring is not prescriptive. It is site-specific. Bellacasa does not wish to replace criticism with a happy, virtuous and benign form of care. Rather she calls for forms of care that cut. Caring means to recognize oppressions and oppositions.

Bellacasa thinks with care in order to reassemble what is exclusionary and damaging. She attends to who is doing the caring, for whom and how, and to the "devalued ordinary labors that are crucial for getting us through the day" (de la Bellacasa 2011, 93). Care is "an ethically and politically charged practice, that has been at the forefront of feminist concerns about devalued labors" (de la Bellacasa 2011, 90). Care is not bounded by field of study or practice. It infuses all tasks—communication, sociability, epistemology, maintenance—involved in making the world livable. Bellacasa identifies these key components of care: worry and thoughtfulness, a sense of belonging to those affected, "a strong sense of attachment and commitment," and a material practice.

Repair contains political possibilities, which have not yet been picked up by theories of care and repair. Reparative history is also about reparations, a calling to account for the legacies of injustice. Ta-Nehisi Coates writes of the need for "full acceptance of our collective biography and its consequences." Reparations stand for a complete accounting of continuing damages due to the historical crimes of slavery. They entail a "national reckoning," " an airing of family secrets, a settling with old ghosts," "a revolution of the American consciousness, a reconciling of our self-image as the great democratizer with the facts of our history" (Coates 2014). Reparations enjoin everyone implicated in this shared history to engage in a collective form of accounting and repair. Finally, reparations call for change, for making amends.

Thinking with Murphy, Jackson, Haraway, Bellacasa and Coates, I might imagine a reparative history as a non-innocent accounting for the past and a making of amends. A reassembly, refiguring and reconfiguring objects to make them more livable. A generous, generative process, testing, cutting and employing old tools in different ways. I am interested less in deconstruction than in serious tinkering.

Reassemblages

What legacies do the raced and gendered histories of the Impostor Syndrome leave for us to reassemble? The Impostor Syndrome reflects anxiety around partial, situated knowledges. Feelings of imposture reinforce the fantasy of a god's eye, total ideal. When I declare myself an impostor, I imagine a totalizing knowledge and vision, to which I do not have access. This is the vision of mastery, a mastery that is intimately related to legacies of enslavement, exploitation and cooptation. It is what Coates calls the Dream, an insouciant sense of owning the world that characterizes the American culture of whiteness (Coates 2015, 50). It is a desire to master and possess. When I attribute this total vision to others, when I apologize for lacking it myself, I associate myself with the Dream of mastery.

This history of *nAch* makes the Dream explicit. Twentieth-century psychologists bound a modernizing affect, the drive to achieve, to the material conquest of property, prosperity and success. David McClelland used *nAch* to explain the "rise of civilization." This is a white, middle-class American civilization, built on an ideology of individual motivation and spreading its achievement-oriented feelings around the globe in a kind of *affective imperialism*. The same psychological project seeks to modernize developing peoples, and then doubles back to exclude African-Americans. On material-historical grounds, they are not given access to that psychological key to well being and success. This is our contemporary achievement world: the drive, the confidence, the Dream that a problem or challenge can be solved, mastered and turned to one's material advantage. The Impostor Syndrome is a symptom of discomfort with the Dream.

The dynamics of paranoia, suspicion and falsification resonate with the history of the Impostor Syndrome. As Sedgwick writes, paranoia "mobilizes guile against suspicion, suspicion against guile" (Sedgwick 2002, 93). The critic is on the lookout for fakers, impostors, subterfuges. Naturally one also turns this suspicion against oneself. Paranoia, phobia and Fear of Success

share a common Freudian root in the psychoanalysis of homosexuality. Fear and suspicion mark one as queer or as "passing." As out of place, and faking it.

This is a cruel vision of culture, wherein the entire field beyond one's own head operates as a totalizing audit apparatus. Often this vision is not so far from that prevailing in the contemporary intellectual-academic field, which is why it works so effectively. I find it striking that many of the core assumptions of achievement psychology are held unreflectively by otherwise socially and intellectually sensitive thinkers. Discussions of research productivity are typically insulated from critical reflection. These discussions take place in personnel meetings, behind closed doors; whereas critical reflection takes place in open talks, publications and panels. Perhaps because one's livelihood—money and achievement—depends on what happens in the closed-door rooms, but liveliness happens in rooms with open doors.

A statement of imposture is a declaration of partial and situated knowledge, designed to lower expectations. A series of preemptive apologies. ("I'm not an expert on this topic; I've only just begun this project and it's not yet fully formed; I hope that this work will be adequate to the venue/ audience/ readers….") Such statements apologize for the quality of the speech to come, the speaker's lack of standing to address a problem, for an inadequate or partial communication. I did this myself at the start of this article, by attaching all sorts of ill-portending modifiers to my performance ("narcissistic," "presentist," "partial"). The paranoid vision is occasioned by a call to judgment of the self, the expectation of being called out. I assume that other people can do the god-trick, can summon up closures and objective judgments that I cannot. I imagine partial, situated knowledges as faulty, weak and perhaps even fraudulent. These apologies only reinforce a vision and an objective of total mastery.

A reparative history might reassemble these technologies of achievement and imposture. The *Reassembled Impostor* seeks strategies not of distance and non-being (imposture, modesty) but of proximity and immodesty. She restores a place and a time to the "nobody'' and "nowhere" of Impostor Syndrome. She shifts her affective investment from a god's eye view, a drive for total mastery, to local, particular knowledge worlds. She starts every conference talk and every class with a declaration not of imposture but of situation, the relations and social positioning in the fields of situated knowledge. She is not always pleasant or polite, for this too is a tactic of non-existence. She attaches herself to moments of quickening and interest in herself and others and tries to build on them, make them grow, imagine their possibilities.

The Reassembled Impostor tinkers with the mechanisms of evaluation and achievement to make them more just and livable. She considers the instruments of evaluation, tools used on and by her, as social-affective technologies. She is cognizant of the speeds of modernization, entrepreneurship and career advancement, and manipulates these speeds by inserting place-holders and stop-gaps with whatever materials are at hand. She seeks to foster other kinds of differential subjectivity (Sandoval 2000). She celebrates spaces of anti-achievement, of failure, play and exploration (Halberstam 2011). She is responsible for shared histories of injustice and works where she can to make amends for past exclusions. She reassembles achievement worlds. Knowing where some of the breaks happened—when women became curable, when African-American children were marked as lacking *nAch*—I look for the mechanisms of that break, and

the possibilities for repair. I return to the original problem—to cure myself of the Impostor Syndrome—and replace it with a new set of problems. I mark the "problem" of minority educational achievement as co-constituted with the "problem" of undomesticated female achievement. I resist relations of rescue, with their distancing superiority complex. All of us marked by *nAch* share an achievement world generating disparities of race, power and income. This is a shared set of realities, into which we are slotted unevenly.

For these reasons I refuse to offer a cure for the Impostor Syndrome. I will not try to overcome my discomfort with the Dream. The desire for mastery always involves closing the doors of rooms where livelihoods are partitioned. Any cure that promises mastery of the self, self-possession, must forget those discomforts and what lies outside the closed doors. The first strategy of repair is to be responsible for my own desire to make myself feel better. I will not replicate the closure of the self-cure, or mask anxieties, ambiguities and exclusions. Nor will I affirm the impostor diagnosis, for this too obscures my responsibilities and my proximity. I would rather reassemble the problem and recognize the essential critical work of thinking with care and anxiety.

Acknowledgements

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