

The Impostor Anticipates the Truth of the Other

Jochem Willemsen, Reitske Meganck, Eline Trenson

Department of Psychoanalysis and Clinical Consulting
Ghent University, Henri Dunantlaan 2, B-9000 Ghent, Belgium
Tel: 0032.92.64.91.15
Fax: 0032.92.64.64.88
Email: Jochem.Willemsen@Ugent.be

Abstract

In this paper, we will elaborate on an article by H el ene Deutsch on the psychology of the impostor. The impostor is a specific type of liar who imposes on others dishonest stories about his identity. From a psychoanalytic point of view, identity is by definition fraudulent as there is no real Self. But the impostor duplicates this fraud by presenting dishonest stories about personal attainments, position, or worldly possessions. Referring to Freud's text on 'Two lies told by children,' we will demonstrate that in the neurotic subject (a) the motive for lying is love, and (b) the purpose of lying is to deny symbolic castration in order to preserve an imaginary ideal. The impostor takes this one step further: here the motive is not love but admiration, and the purpose is not denial but disavowal of the symbolic castration. Finally, we will discuss the ambivalent relation of the public towards the impostor that seems all too willing to be deceived. In that sense, the lies of the impostor anticipate the Other's truth about castration.

Keywords: Impostor - Identity - Perverse structure - H el ene Deutsch - Lie

1. Introduction

There is a long tradition of studies in criminological, psychiatric, and psychoanalytic literature on the personality type of the imposture. Probably there is no other type of offender that has been conceived so often as a specific offender-type. Murderers and thieves are heterogeneous groups and very few authors have tried to define these groups on the basis of one discriminating trait. Impostors on the other hand have often been studied as a separate group in psychiatry probably since Delbr uck's publication on *pseudologia fantastica* in 1891. *Pseudologia fantastica* refers to the symptom, found in psychotic and personality disordered subjects, which consists of a mixture of lying and self-deception, to such a degree that is impossible to talk about a purposeful lie or about a clear delusion. Delbr uck describes *pseudologia fantastica* in terms of two contradictory but simultaneous states of consciousness – one deceitful and the other truthful – which results in telling lies, knowing that one lies and at the same time believing one's own lies. In this study, we will focus on this symptom in the criminal context from a structural-psychoanalytic point of view. Our proposition is that

imposture, conning and swindling are not only means to make a lot of money – although they certainly serve that purpose too and serve it very well – but they are primarily a way of relating to the Other, to reality and to the truth. More specifically, we will argue that the symptom of imposture is part of a subject structure that aims at anticipating and revealing the truth of the Other.

2. The deceptive interactions by the impostor

We will start by describing in more detail what the impostor does and how he does it. The sole definition of the impostor we found in the literature is given by the psychoanalyst Phyllis Greenacre. According to her definition, the impostor is “not only a liar, but a very special type of liar who *imposes* on others fabrications of his attainments, position, or worldly possessions.” (Greenacre, 1958, p. 359) The impostor may do this through misrepresentation of his identity, by presenting himself with a fictitious name, history, and other items of personal identity, either borrowed from some other actual person or fabricated according to some imaginative conception of himself.

The approach of impostors in the context of a swindle can generally be described in three steps (other divisions are possible, e.g. Maurer (1974)). The first step consists of selecting a victim and earning his or her trust. One would think that the victim needs to be a pliant person with a weak personality, but impostors know that everybody can be conned. Impostors are glib personalities who make easy connections with other people. Agness Hankiss (1980) found that swindlers use typical strategies for establishing new contacts. Contact with the victim can be made by a strategy called the ‘shot in the dark.’ In this strategy, the impostor expresses a guess about the victim’s background, about a possible relation between the victim and the impostor, or some other factor which, if the guess turns out to be true (or nearly true) serves to establish a basis for a relationship between the two. The impostor might say “Are you not Mr. ..., I think we met some years ago in ...” The impostor might use information on the victim in order to make a more calculated guess. But it is surprising that the victim will often go along with the impostor’s guess, and correct him when the impostor is mistaken. For example, Hankiss (1980) gives the example of an impostor who introduces himself as Mr. White, to which the victim responds, “What Mr. White? I don’t know anybody named White. Is your name not Weaver?” To which the impostor replies that yes, he was “The very same Mr. Weaver.” Another strategy to build up a relation with the victim is ‘stroking,’ which refers to ‘verbal reinforcements that create a feeling of happiness, success, and well-being’ (Hankiss, 1980, p. 105). Impostors make themselves attractive by making the victim feel good about him- or herself. For this purpose, they use sentimental gestures, flattery, respectfulness, presents, acts of courtesy, etc. Impostors are expert in making a pleasant and well-mannered impression on their victim. As a result of this stroking, many victims are actually eager to trust their money in the hands of the impostor. Even after the imposture has been revealed, many victims continue to have a positive feeling about the impostor.

The second step in the imposture is doing a proposal to make money in a dishonest way. The main strategy used here is called 'the bait': the bait is the reward that the impostor dangles before the victim in order to induce a desire in the victim to take part in the scheme. The bait is always some more or less fraudulent scenario of making money or obtaining some material benefit. For instance an impostor might propose a new type of online saving accounts that yield 10% interest. There is truth in the saying that you can't fool an honest man. The impostor speculates on the human weaknesses in his victim, such as greed and vanity (Maurer, 1974). The impostor is an expert in creating a conspiratorial atmosphere with the prospect of a sure profit. The bait is often made more attractive and more convincing by another strategy, called 'story-plotting'. Story-plotting is providing many irrelevant details to make the proposal more authentic. The fictitious identity that is held up by the impostor is part of this strategy.

In the third step, a complication is introduced: the victim has to make a contribution in order to make the plan succeed. Sometimes the victim is sent home to get some money, or he has to transfer some money to the impostor. Of course, the victim will never see his or her money again. Interestingly enough in this third step the victim is made an active accomplice of the impostor: it is the victim itself who voluntarily hands over his or her money to the impostor. If necessary, the impostor applies in this third step another strategy called 'the mirror-game,' in which the impostor "confronts the victim with a hidden thoughts, disarming him by anticipating the actual confrontation sensed from the victim." (Hankiss, 1980, p. 108) Hankiss gives the example of an impostor who walked into the city hall together with an accomplice dressed as a technician. The impostor announces that they had come for a clock which was to be repaired. The personnel in the city hall was reluctant to hand over the clock, probably because of its great value. But before the personnel could make any objection, the impostor himself pointed out the extraordinary value of the clock, declaring that it was the reason that he had come for it in person. Thus the impostor might direct the victim's attention to the most sensitive aspect, and authenticate his role by seeming to injure his own cause.

Although in such instances of swindle and fraud, it is clear that the material gain is a major motive, this motive in itself is not sufficient to explain the impostor's behaviour. The material benefit is often small or not proportioned to the effort. In fact, acts of imposture often involve a quality of showmanship rather than genuine shrewdness. Impostors are peculiarly sharp, perceptive and quick responsive in the area of their imposture, but they are often inconsiderate to many ordinary considerations and precautions. The impostor lies and deceives, even if it is clear beforehand that the truth will be revealed a short while later. As Greenacre notes: "Skill and persuasiveness are combined with utter foolishness and stupidity." (Greenacre, 1958, p. 364) Therefore, it seems that unconscious motives rather than material motives play a role. That is why we state that imposture should not only be studied as a criminal phenomenon, but also as a psychopathological symptom.

3. Helene Deutsch on the impostor

In 1955, Helene Deutsch published the case report of Jimmy, a young psychopathic impostor, whom she followed for treatment during eight years (Deutsch, 2001). Jimmy accepted positions which he did not keep, made promises and broke them, accepted financial commitments but neglected them, etcetera. Furthermore, he developed a lifestyle in which the outward showing and self-glorification were more important than real achievements. During the years in treatment with Helene Deutsch, he successively became a gentleman farmer, a writer, a movie producer, and an inventor. In each case he invested much money and attention in the right setting, the right outfit, and the right network of people; and sometimes, for a short while, he achieved some success in convincing other people of his talent. However, he lacked perseverance and pragmatic approach to achieve his goals, and quite soon Jimmy grew tired of his occupation and abandoned his life for a new project. At certain moments, he made connections by using someone else's name or he altered his name in such a way that it was almost identical with the name of a celebrity in a particular field.

According to Helene Deutsch, Jimmy was constantly in the pursuit of an identity which would do justice to his narcissistic conception of himself. This masquerade – sometimes completed with a false name – served to cover up his devaluated and guilt-laden ego. In the case of Jimmy, Helene Deutsch traces back this devaluated ego to an early identification with his powerful and tyrannical father. When this father became ill and died, the idealised point of identification subsided. For this, Jimmy had to compensate with his imposture, i.e. by making himself and others believe in his greatness.

At the end of her text, Helene Deutsch notes that ever since she studies the impostor, she finds him everywhere, among her friends and acquaintances, as well as in herself (Deutsch, 2001, p. 130). Indeed, most people experience some degree of conflict between their ego and their ego ideal, and it is not uncommon for us to resolve this conflict by pretending to be who we would like to be. On the one hand, this suggestion by Helene Deutsch is interesting, because it indicates that the study of the impostor will give insight into the human condition. On the other hand, this suggestion is also confusing, as it might mean that there is no real difference between 'normal' hypocrisy, bragging, and narcissism, and unadulterated imposture.

It seems to us that the impostor gives a specific twist to the human relation towards others, towards reality, and towards ourselves.

4. Identity

From a structural-psychoanalytic point of view, the relation towards others, towards reality and towards ourselves is not a direct relation, but is mediated by the symbolic register. This means that events in reality, interpersonal relations, and our identity are conceived and constructed by means of signifiers. The register of the Symbolic has two characteristics: it is conventional and it presents a fundamental lack. The conventional character of the symbolic register refers to the fact that signifiers are culturally

determined and shared by a group of people. The signifiers we use to interpret our relation towards reality, towards others and towards ourselves are determined by the culture, the group and the family we live in, the primary caretakers to begin with. Although we can make choices to take over certain signifiers, and to reject others, the signifiers always come from others in the first place. Next to this conventional character, the symbolic is also characterised by a fundamental lack. This lack refers to the fact that no signifier will even be able to completely grasp our relation towards reality, towards others and towards ourselves. The signifiers provide a framework, but do not correspond completely with the thing itself.

The conventional character and the central lack can also be found at the level of our identity. In Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis, identity and sense of self involve the mechanism of identification, by which images and representations encountered in the external world – in the first place in the caretakers – are interiorised (Vanheule & Verhaeghe, 2009). Although the mechanism of identification starts functioning at a very early age, the identity and the sense of self that result from this mechanism are not a priori given. Lacan postulates that the core of the identity is constituted by an inner lack or emptiness, which he calls our ‘lack of being’. Moreover, this inner lack is a structural characteristic, meaning that none of the images and the representations people use to build up an identity will ever be sufficient to completely fill in this original emptiness. This idea is expressed metaphorically by Lacan with an onion: the layers of our identity are as the layers of an onion, with no kernel (Lacan, 1988, p. 171). This idea of a central emptiness implies that there is no true self or real identity: the formation of identity is a dialectical process between what the others offer and what the subject chooses to interiorate. There is no one-on-one match between a certain subject and a certain image or representation, and this gives our identity an arbitrary character. Because identity is arbitrary and covers up an underlying emptiness, identity – in a certain sense – is deceptive and untrue.

At the same time, this ‘lack of being’ initiates a desire in the subject for the complement that fills in the lack. The subject inevitably turns to others in order to receive an identification that could fill in the original lack. As the subject has to rely on others for providing an adequate identification, the subject becomes dependent on the others. This dependency is the background against which frightening questions arise, such as how can I guarantee that the other will not disrespect and abandon me? The creation of Ego-ideals is the solution to these questions. Ego-ideals are the representations that direct the desire of the other, and that function as a guarantee for the approval and love by the other. By identifying with the ideals that others hold, the subject tries to gain the respect and love by the other. The identification with Ego-ideals therefore functions as an anxiolytic, as it introduces a degree of certainty and confidence that one evokes respect, love and desire in the other. In that way, the Ego-ideal is the almost-perfect cover up of the inner lack of identity. We say almost-perfect, because no Ego-ideal will ever be able to completely fill in the fundamental lack of identity.

That is why most people will invest quite some time and effort in monitoring the difference between the Ego-ideals they uphold and their actual Ego. For this monitoring, they depend on the feedback and the recognition by others as a way of

confirming that they are doing well. In case the discrepancy between the Ego and an Ego-ideal becomes too large, and possibly the subject is made attentive to this discrepancy by the other, than feelings of uncertainty, helplessness and possibly depression increase. In some cases, lying or imposture serve to mask such discrepancies (which was the proposition made by Helene Deutsch). Freud (1913) gives two examples of lies told by children.

A girl of ten years old was set the task in the drawing lesson of making a free-hand drawing of a circle. She secretly uses a pair of compasses and produces a perfect circle. When she starts boasting to her neighbour in the class about her achievement, she is discovered by the mistress and confronted. However, the girl stubbornly denies what she had done. In another occasion, a school-fellow boasted to the same girl: 'Yesterday we had ice at dinner.' The girl replied: 'Oh we have ice every day.' In reality she did not know what ice at dinner could mean, but she assumed that it must be great for having it at dinner. Both lies were generated by the same underlying unconscious motive. The girl had a strong attachment to her father, but she could not long escape the discovery that her father was not as perfect as she was inclined to think him. Her father was an excellent draughtsman, and as a result of her identification with her father she wanted to draw the circle at school perfectly. It was as though she wanted to boast with the capacities of her father. On the other occasion, she boasted to a school-fellow about the ice at dinner, in order not to be outdone and have her father belittled who in fact was not rich enough to have ice at dinner.

So identity and ideals are always deceptive and untrue, in a sense that their aim is to deny the underlying truth, notably that the human being is marked by a fundamental lack. What these illustrations by Freud indicate is that boasting and lying – which we can consider mild forms of imposture – are motivated by love (for the father in this case) and aimed at denying the failure or shortcoming of the father and preserving the ideal. In the impostor, this deception is duplicated because the impostor consciously deceives other people by lying about his identity. How can we understand this?

The impostor is not just a liar who consciously deceives other people for material gain. However, this does not mean that the impostor believes his own lies (as in a delusional state) or wants to believe his own lies (as in a neurotic lack of self-confidence)? Although some impostors make such claims as an excuse for their actions, the evidence for self-deception or delusional convictions in impostors is meagre. In fact, the impostor knows that he is fabricating, he can be confronted with his lies, and in a moment of sincerity he will admit that he has been lying. It is too simple to put the problem of imposture in opposite terms (they act consciously and purposely versus they are duped by their own lies); their actions are motivated by more complex dynamic.

5. Conclusion: Anticipating the truth of the Other

In the description of *pseudologia fantastica* by Delbruck, we find the interesting idea of a double stance towards reality, notably an attitude that can be described as sincerely

lying. We think the impostor is characterized by this contradictory attitude: on the one hand he is sincere in his aim to gain the confidence or appreciation of other people, but at the same time his means to obtain this goal are insincere and unreliable. In this attitude, we recognize the mechanism of disavowal that Freud coined for perversion (Freud, 1927). The mechanism of disavowal determines the pervert's entire relation to the Other: the pervert disavows the fundamental lack, while at the same time recognizing its existence for the rest of the world in general and for the father in particular. The result is a clear-cut split: the pervert lives in a divided world where lack and the regulating law are both recognized and disavowed the same time. In the pervert's own world, there is no lack and his laws are imposed on the Other. In the conventional world, the laws will apparently be followed, that is to say, the pervert acts on the assumption that others will follow the conventional rules and he will make full use of this knowledge.

It is this split that we find in the impostor's paradoxical attitude towards his own lies. The impostor knows that he lies and at the same time believes in his own lies. The basic attitude of the impostor towards the other and reality is the attitude that living in a reality that is structured through the symbolic is living in a false reality. An act of imposture is like a pervert scenario, aimed at demonstrating the false nature of the symbolic and the convention. Different authors point out that the impostor finds pleasure in his deceptive actions: Greenacre (1958) speaks about inner triumph and Ekman (1992) coined the term of 'duping delight.' They refer to the fact that the impostor finds pleasure in the thrill of deceiving someone, and in the contempt of their victim. Moreover, the impostor finds pleasure in the fact that he can gain confidence of other people, that he can make other people believe in what he pretends. But his final aim and satisfaction lies in demonstrating to his victims that they have been fooled.

References

- Deutsch, H. (2001). The impostor: Contribution to ego psychology of a type of psychopath. In J. R. Meloy (Ed.) *The mark of Cain, Psychoanalytic insight and the psychopath*. Hillsdale, New Jersey: The Analytic Press.
- Ekman, P. (1992). *Telling lies: Clues to deceit in the marketplace, politics, and marriage*. New York: Norton.
- Freud, S. (1913). Two lies told by children. *SE*, 12, 303-309.
- Freud, S. (1927). Fetishism. *SE*, 21, 147-157.
- Greenacre, P. (1958). The impostor. *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 27, 359-382.
- Hankiss, A. (1980). Games con men play: The semiosis of deceptive interaction. *Journal of Communication*, 30, 104-112.
- Lacan, J. (1988). *The seminar 1953-1954: Book 1. Freud's papers on technique* (J. A. Miller & J. Forrester, Ed. and Trans.). New York: Norton.
- Maurer, D. W. (1974). *The American confidence man*. Springfield: Charles C. Thomas Publisher.

Vanheule, S., & Verhaeghe, P. (2009). Identity through a psychoanalytic looking glass. *Theory and Psychology, 19*, 319-411.