Learning, Empowerment, and Gender: The Impression Management Connection

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ABSTRACT:

Research suggests a positive link between worker empowerment and use of learned impression management skills. This study identified key gender differences in the impression management behaviours and attitudes of tomorrow's workforce. Women showed higher intentional impression management behaviours, while men reported more positive attitudes. Organizations can improve workforce empowerment through formalized, directed learning on the benefits of positive self-presentation.

Introduction

"With those whom one does not know, careful performances are required." — Goffman, 1959, p. 222.

"Impression management is a central part of the very nature of social interaction." (Schlenker, 1980, p. 7).

An interpretive perspective created by Erving Goffman (1959), impression management uses the theater as a metaphor to explain social action (Rosenfeld, Giacalone and Riordan, 1998). According to Goffman (1959), people are social actors who use impression management techniques to construct mutual understandings of their social 'roles'.

Unfortunately, before the 1980s, impression management was typically viewed as a negative activity, used to build illegitimate power and influence. More recently, however, the organizational literature has adopted a positive or 'expansive' view of impression management (Schlenker and Weigold, 1992). When used ethically, research suggests it contributes to positive individual and organizational outcomes. For example, we positively manage impressions when we try to control the way that others view our motivations, behaviours and personal attributes, including abilities and future potential (Rosenfeld, Giacalone and Riordan, 1998). Common impression management techniques include changing our physical appearance and behaviour, to project a more desirable image (e.g., Gardner, 1992; Liden and Mitchell, 1988).

The literature shows a positive link between the use of socially learned impression management behaviours and workplace empowerment. However, previous research has also suggested important gender differences in managing impressions, which may limit the empowerment that women and men experience in their work context. The following sections summarize the literature on this connection between learned impression management, gender and empowerment.

Learning impression management. The literature suggests impression management is learned behaviour. For example, Gardner and Martinko (1988) use social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) to explain how impression management is shaped by interactions among a person, his or her behaviour, his or her audience and the external environment. Research suggests the impression management process is directly influenced by the cognitions of the actor and his or her audience (e.g., Schlenker, 1980; Tedeschi, 1981). That is, at the individual level, we can understand impression management as tacit knowledge or cognitive scripts, i.e., overlearned habits (Bozeman and Kacmar, 1997; Gioia and Poole, 1984; Tetlock and Manstead, 1985). Scripts are learned and refined through repeated social exchanges . . . [and] can also be learned by watching the behavior of others.? (Gardner and Martinko, 1988, p. 328).

Because impression management skills are overlearned scripts or habits, those skills are often culture-bound (Bond, 1991). Indeed, Goffman argued that ?etiquette . . . varies, of course, from one society and subculture to another.? (Goffman, 1959, p. 230). Unfortunately, few researchers have studied the relationship between ethnic or national culture and impression management behaviours, despite the important implications for today's diverse
workplace (Rosenfeld, Giacalone and Riordan, 1994). However, Xin (1997) recently found that Asian American managers used less useful impression management tactics than their European American counterparts. The Asian American managers believed they were displaying image-enhancing behaviours, a perception that was often not held by their supervisors.

Impression management and empowerment. Impression management is strongly influenced by symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969), an interpretive perspective (e.g., Douglas, Adler, Adler, Fontana, Freeman and Kotarba, 1980) that emphasizes the micro-processes that lead to identity formation. Goffman argued that we develop a sense of 'self' through interaction with other people, i.e., our 'audience' (Ritzer, 1992). That is, people can learn to perform roles, consisting of positive appearances and behaviours, which inspire positive impressions in others. Through these performances, we present ourselves as having the knowledge and skills needed for increased organizational responsibility (Rosenfeld, Giacalone and Riordan, 1994). Through continued positive interactions with one's supervisors and co-workers, this self-image stabilizes and we continue to present ourselves as empowered members of the workplace. For example, research by Wayne and others (e.g., Wayne and Ferris, 1990; Wayne and Liden, 1995) shows that positive impression management skills are linked to higher performance evaluations. This research is important, because it suggests we can empower ourselves in the workplace by creating a sincere and accurate image of our capabilities.

Gender differences in managing impressions. Little research has specifically addressed the link between impression management and workplace diversity, including gender (Gardner and Martinko, 1988; Rosenfeld, Giacalone and Riordan, 1994). The existing literature usually focuses on the challenges experienced by female employees. For example, Kacmar and Carlson (1994) argued that female job applicants would benefit through greater use of 'other-centred' impression management tactics, such as commenting positively about the organization during the interview. Similarly, Wayne, Liden and Sparrowe (1994) suggested that women could enhance interactions with male supervisors, through effective use of positive self-presentation. Finally, Dryburgh (1999) described the added impression management behaviours required of female engineering students. All the engineering students, male and female, strove to display a competent image during their professional socialization. However, the female students also worked hard to develop impressions about their strong commitment to joining the 'masculine' engineering profession.

Purpose of the study. It is important to build our knowledge about gender differences in impression management, because positive self-presentation is one way of taking control of a situation that threatens to be unpleasant or unjust. (Dryburgh, 1999, p. 681). The current study contributes to that project, exploring gender differences in the impression management behaviours and attitudes of a group of future managers. To accomplish this, the study uses a mixed methodology. The quantitative data describe gender differences in impression management behaviours and attitudes. The qualitative data enrich our understanding of attitudinal differences toward positive self-presentation. The paper concludes with a discussion of how to foster empowerment through workplace learning of impression management behaviours.

Method

Participants

Study participants were 134 management undergraduates at a small Western Canadian university. The sample consisted of students enrolled in two course sections of a required third year course in Human Resource Management, and two course sections of a required fourth year course in Strategic Management. Fifty-nine (44 per cent) were female and 72 (54 per cent) were male. The average age of these future managers was 23.3 years (SD=4.07 years).
Measures

Participants completed two validated self-report measures in separate untimed conditions. Both measures show acceptable reliability levels from earlier research. Participants also completed five additional items on impression management attitudes and behaviours.

Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding. The Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR: Paulhus, 1991) is a recent 40-item, two-dimensional measure of impression management, which uses a seven-point Likert scale (Very True to Not True). Unlike other measures, the BIDR has the advantage of tapping both unintentional and intentional impression management constructs (Zerbe and Paulhus, 1987). The Self-Deceptive Enhancement (SDE) scale (20 items) is the tendency to give positively biased, yet honest descriptions of one's behaviour (Paulhus, 1991). For example:

“I don’t care to know what other people really think of me.” (Question 3)
“I never regret my decisions.” (Question 11)
“It’s all right with me if some people happen to dislike me.” (Question 19)

In contrast, the Impression Management (IM) scale (20 items) is the intentional positive presentation of self to an audience. For example:

“I never cover up my mistakes.” (Question 22)
“I have never dropped litter on the street.” (Question 32)
“I don’t gossip about other people's business.” (Question 40)

After recoding of reverse-scored and extreme responses, the resulting SDE and IM scores range from 0 to 20, where higher scores suggest an increased tendency toward positively biased self-presentation. Previous research has reported gender differences for the BIDR, with women showing significantly higher scores for both SDE and IM subscales (e.g., Miles and King, 1998).

Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale. The Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability scale (MCSD: Crowne and Marlowe, 1960) assesses situational demand, that is, the tendency to respond in a socially acceptable manner. The measure consists of 33 items, using a two-point (True-False) scale. Example items include:

“Before voting, I thoroughly investigate the qualifications of all the candidates.” (Question 1)
“No matter who I’m talking to, I’m always a good listener.” (Question 13)
“There have been times when I was quite jealous of the good fortune of others.” (Question 28)

Possible scores range from 0 to 33, where higher scores suggest greater responsiveness to situational compliance.

Supplementary Questions. When participants completed the BIDR, they also responded to five additional statements, using the same seven-point Likert scale (Very True to Not True). These items provided complementary information on their self-reported impression management behaviours and attitudes:

“When I apply for a job, I always try to create the best impression.” (Question 41)
“I have changed my physical appearance (e.g., clothes, haircut), to present myself more positively to others in the workplace.” (Question 42)
“I have changed my behaviour, to present myself more positively to others in the workplace.” (Question 43)

“People have more influence in the workplace, when they create a positive impression in their supervisor.” (Question 44)
“People have more influence in the workplace, when they create a positive impression in their co-workers.” (Question 45)

Procedure

At the following class session, participants were provided with their own SDE and IM scores, and a handout on the BIDR. The handout also provided group-based summaries of the descriptive statistics and the qualitative
comments. The researcher presented guidelines for interpretation of individual scores, and class discussion focused on implications for social interactions in classroom and organizational settings. Direct links were made to the content of the two management courses, including topics such as personnel selection and recruitment, performance appraisal, organizational power and politics, and organizational legitimacy.

Results

Quantitative Analysis of BIDR

All quantitative data was analyzed with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, 1997). Following Paulhus (1991), the BIDR data were recoded prior to calculation of the two scale scores. The MCSD data were recoded, and an overall score computed, as described in Crowne and Marlowe (1960). Pearson correlations were used to test for significant relationships among the SDE, IM and the MCSD scale scores. Gender differences for SDE, IM and self-reported impression management attitudes and behaviours were analyzed with t-tests, where sex was the independent variable.

Table 1 shows the scale means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for the SDE and IM scales on the BIDR, and the MCSD. The means and standard deviations for both SDE and IM are comparable to those reported by Paulhus (1991). These data also support the two-dimensional nature of impression management. Unintentional SDE and intentional IM behaviours showed a moderate, positive correlation, suggesting that the scales assess two related, yet distinct constructs (r=0.335, p<.01). Both scales also correlated significantly with the MCSD, a familiar measure of response bias. These positive correlations were not surprising, as some researchers use the BIDR as an alternative measure of response bias (Paulhus, 1991).

Gender differences on BIDR. Table 2 provides the scale means and standard deviations on the BIDR’s scales by gender. The t-test results show no significant gender difference in unintentional self-presentation (i.e., SDE). However, the female future managers did show significantly higher levels of intentional impression management, as assessed by the BIDR (i.e., IM: M=6.12, SD=3.28, t=-2.31, p=.022).

Quantitative Analysis of Supplementary Questions

As seen in Table 3, management undergraduates reported generally positive impression management behaviours and attitudes. Most students agreed that they practiced impression management behaviours in the job application process (M=6.36, SD=1.15). However, the students were less likely to report that they had actually changed their physical appearance or behaviour, to practice positive impression management in the workplace. Self-reported attitudes toward impression management were slightly higher. Many of the undergraduates agreed that people have more influence in the workplace when they create a positive impression with their supervisor or co-worker.

Gender differences. The current research found no gender differences in the self-reported impression management behaviours, as shown in Table 3. However, the t-tests revealed significant gender differences on attitudes toward impression management. The men were significantly more likely to agree that an important link exists between positive self-presentation and level of influence with one’s supervisor and co-workers.

Qualitative Analysis of Written Comments

Fifteen of the 134 participants also provided written comments, on impression management generally or the BIDR specifically. These comments were divided into three groups, based on their IM level (i.e., high, medium, low), as shown by their individual score on that BIDR subscale. High IM was defined as top quartile, low IM as bottom quartile, and medium IM as the second and third quartile. At least three participants from each of the groups provided a written comment.
Despite the small number of comments, some general trends can be identified. For example, as a group the 15 participants felt compelled to write both positive and negative comments, sometimes within the same statement. In the high IM group, two of the three participants submitted positive statements, suggesting positive IM attitudes toward impression management:

“The most important thing I have learned in my adult life thus far is that most humans have strong preferences and you can get ahead by figuring out how to appeal to those preferences.”

and the BIDR classroom exercise:

“This exercise provides some input [and] ... and creates areas for improvement.”

In contrast, more of the comments received by low IM participants reflected quizzical or even negative attitudes toward the BIDR exercise. Four of the seven participants in this group commented on the BIDR’s ‘peculiar’ questions. For example:

“Some of the questions were pretty personal and might not be answered honestly.”

The comment of another participant suggested her lower ability to identify opportunities for positive IM activities:

“A lot of [these] situations have never occurred in my life.”

Finally, the middle IM group showed more ambivalent views on IM. For example, one participant began her comment with an affirmation on the importance of impression management, but concluded with a warning that impressions are often ‘incorrect’.

“Impressions count a lot in our society. People tend to have a criteria of what’s right and wrong, even though they may not always be correct.”

In another example, a middle IM participant qualified her responses to the BIDR, suggesting the situationally contingent nature of her IM activities.

“A couple of very situation specific experiences affected my answers, as I’m sure is the case for most people. Also, when it comes to the workplace I follow the saying ‘When in Rome ...[do as the Romans do.]’”

Discussion

“All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players; They have their exits and their entrances, And one man in his time plays many parts”

-Jaques in As You Like It, William Shakespeare, II.VII.139.

The quantitative results suggest that these future managers have acceptable skills in impression management, with IM means comparable to those reported by Paulhus (1991). Similarly, responses to the five supplementary questions suggest that the participants have generally positive behaviours and attitudes toward positive self-presentation. Similarly, the qualitative comments suggest that middle and high IM participants hold generally positive attitudes about impression management. However, the comments of these future managers also revealed some ambivalence toward impression management. Several participants recognized the need to positively manage impressions. However, some also wrote that they regretted this emphasis on impressions in our society.

The quantitative findings also suggest key gender differences in impression management behaviours and attitudes. Specifically, according to the BIDR, the women demonstrated significantly higher skills in impression management, agreeing with reported differences in the literature (e.g., Miles and King, 1998). However, in the supplementary questions, the male participants reported significantly more positive attitudes toward using impression management tactics to enhance one's influence with both supervisors and co-workers.

Admittedly, the current study does have limitations, as the sample consisted of management undergraduates. However, the findings complement existing research, adding detail on important gender differences in attitudes toward positive self-presentation. The results also show the complementary insights provided by qualitative comments, suggesting the need for additional qualitative research on this important topic.
To summarize, research suggests that ethical, accurate impression management is positively linked to desirable work outcomes such as workplace influence and improved task performance (Baumeister, 1982). That is, organizations can foster employee empowerment by encouraging the ethical use of positive self-presentation. However, the research also suggests impression management is socially learned. Formal training in ethical impression management tactics would ensure that the organization did not foster unhealthy, politically motivated self-promotion. Formalized workplace learning in impression management skills would also ensure that gender and ethnic differences are considered. For example, the results of this study suggest that female employees may need more training on the empowering benefits of positive self-presentation. In contrast, male employees understand its worth, but may require practical training on how to intentionally practice positive self-presentation.

References


Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Matrix for Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR) \(^1,2\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impression Management Dimensions</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1.</th>
<th>2.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Self-Deceptive Enhancement</td>
<td>6.22</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Impression Management</td>
<td>5.39</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>.335</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale</td>
<td>17.31</td>
<td>5.10</td>
<td>.277</td>
<td>.336</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\) N=134.

\(^2\) Intercorrelations significant at \(p<.01\) level.

Table 2

Mean Scores and T-tests on Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding by Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impression Management</th>
<th>Males (n=72)</th>
<th>Females (n=59)</th>
<th>t (p-value)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-deceptive enhancement</td>
<td>6.26</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>6.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impression management</td>
<td>4.79</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>6.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Self-Reported Impression Management Behaviours and Attitudes (N=134)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Behaviours:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I apply for a job, I always try to create the best impression.</td>
<td>6.36</td>
<td>1.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have changed my physical appearance (e.g., clothes, haircut), to present myself more positively to others in the workplace.</td>
<td>4.92</td>
<td>1.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have changed my behaviour, to present myself more</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
positively to others in the workplace.  

**Attitudes:**

People have more influence in the workplace, when they create

a positive impression in their supervisor.  

People have more influence in the workplace, when they create

a positive impression in their co-workers.  

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1 Based on a 7-point scale, where 1=Not True, 4=Somewhat True, and 7=Very True

2 Males (M=5.77, SD=1.10); Females (M=5.30, SD=1.26); t= 2.32, p<.05, df=132.

3 Males (M=5.93, SD=0.93); Females (M=5.44, SD=1.19); t= 2.61, p<.01, df=113.