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Citation

Interviewers' Sensitivity to Impression Management Tactics in Structured Interviews

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Abstract. This study examines interviewers' sensitivity to impression management in structured interviews by determining the relative importance that interviewers attach to (verbal and nonverbal) impression management as compared to the relative importance that they attach to predetermined competencies. Two samples of interviewers (55 Master I/O psychology students and 18 professional interviewers) watched and evaluated videotaped interviewees who were instructed to put their best foot forward. Results of relative weight analyses showed that the importance of verbal and nonverbal impression management tactics was relatively small as compared to the importance attached to job-related competencies. The type of interview format had some effect on interviewers' sensitivity to impression management tactics. In particular, in behavior description interviews the interviewers in both samples attached most relative weight to self-focused verbal tactics. Interviewer experience was not related to interviewers' sensitivity to impression management tactics.

Keywords: impression management tactics, structured interviews, behavior description interviews, situational interviews, bias

Introduction

Interviewers' decision making has been scrutinized for many intrapersonal and interpersonal biases (e.g., race, gender, physical attractiveness, first impressions, likability). Impression management (IM) on the part of interviewees is another factor that might affect interview ratings. IM is the process by which people attempt to influence the images others have of them during social interaction, either consciously or unconsciously (Fletcher, 1989, 1990; Schenkler, 1980; Schneider, 1981). According to Schneider (1981), IM can take many forms, including verbal and nonverbal IM. Among verbal IM, a further distinction is made between assertive and defensive verbal IM. Assertive verbal IM is used to actively construct a favorable image and consists of both other-focused and self-focused IM. Other-focused IM or ingratiation (e.g., opinion conformity) is designed to evoke interpersonal attraction or liking. Self-focused IM or self-promotion (e.g., an entitlement) is used to show that one possesses desirable qualities for the job. Defensive verbal IM is used to protect or repair one's image (e.g., justifications). IM may also occur in the form of (positive) nonverbal or expressive behaviors, such as smiling, eye contact, hand gestures, or nodding affirmatively (Kacmar, Delery, & Ferris, 1992; Stevens & Kristof, 1995; Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984).

The employment interview is a prime place for candidates to manage impressions due to its interpersonal nature, ambiguity, short duration, and high stakes. Prior IM studies mainly focused on the question "Can or do applicants (i.e., the *actors*) influence their interview evaluations through IM?" (e.g., Ellis, West, Ryan, & DeShon, 2002; Higgins & Judge, 2004; Kristof-Brown, Barrick, & Franke, 2002; McFarland, Ryan, & Kriska, 2003; Stevens & Kristof, 1995; Tsai, Chen, & Chiu, 2005). Conversely, little attention has been paid to the sensitivity of the interviewers (i.e., the *targets*) to IM in structured interviews. Therefore, we examine the relative importance that interviewers attach to (verbal and nonverbal) IM as compared to the relative importance that they attach to predetermined competencies.

Interviewers' Sensitivity to IM

In light of interviews' short duration and substantial cognitive demands (Dipboye, 1992), it might be expected that interviewers curtail the complex information seeking and judgment process by using cognitive heuristics. Especially the use of these psychological rules-of-thumb might make them sensitive to IM use on the part of candidates. Specifically, two psychological theories are helpful to understand how the use of specific IM tactics on the part of candidates might evoke specific heuristics on the part of interviewers, increasing their sensitivity to IM (Ellis et al., 2002; Lim & Ryan, 2002).

First, *attribution theory* assumes that people have a strong and almost automatic need to understand and explain what is going on around them (Weiner, 1985, 1986; see also Ellis et al., 2002; Silvester, Anderson-Gough, Anderson, & Moham-

med, 2002). Basically, causes of an event are attributed either externally (situationally) or internally (dispositionally). Applied to the employment interview context, interviewers can be assumed to try to determine why interviewees did something in the past (e.g., in a behavior description interview) or why they intend to do something in the future (e.g., in a situational interview). Interviewees, in turn, can use specific IM tactics to work on this tendency of interviewers to attribute causes to behavior. To this end, use of self-focused IM might be especially effective. For example, when an interviewee uses self-promoting utterances that illustrate that he or she possesses desirable qualities for the job, these self-focused tactics are likely to evoke attributions of competence. Such self-promotions might invoke interviewers to shortcut the information process and attribute interviewee behavior to internal causes (Ellis et al., 2002). Besides self-focused IM, we expect that defensive tactics (e.g., apologies, excuses) might exert similar effects. These defensive tactics direct causal attributions of negative events away from the interviewee or change the magnitude of such causal attributions (Lim & Ryan, 2002).

Second, *cognitive categorization* theory posits that the similarity heuristic is often used to quickly organize and classify new information (Medin, Goldstone, & Gentner, 1993). It has also been found that those who are viewed as familiar or similar to oneself are seen as attractive (see the *similar-to-me* paradigm in Byrne, 1971; Sacco, Scheu, Ryan, & Schmitt, 2003; Wayne & Liden, 1995). Similarity judgments help to explain why interviewers might be sensitive to specific IM tactics because some IM tactics aim to evoke similarity and interpersonal liking. For example, interviewees can use other-focused IM tactics (also known as ingratiation tactics) such as opinion conformity (i.e., expressing views and beliefs that the interviewee assumes the interviewer also holds) to make the interviewer like them. When such tactics are deployed, interviewers might curtail information processing by using a similar-to-me heuristic, leading to more favorable interviewee judgments.

Although the above explains why and how IM tactic use on the part of interviewees might set off specific decision making heuristics on the part of cognitively-overloaded interviewers, it is also important to discuss possible approaches for diminishing interviewers' sensitivity to IM. Along these lines, structured interviewing practices have been advocated to reduce interviewers' sensitivity to IM (Campion, Palmer, & Campion, 1997; Stevens & Kristof, 1995; Tsai et al., 2005). A common thread running through structured interview practices (e.g., question standardization, response scoring standardization) is that they enable interviewers to focus the conversation on job-related aspects so that the influence of extraneous information (e.g., IM tactics) on interviewer decisions is minimized. Thus, *Hypothesis 1* posits that in structured interviews the relative importance of IM tactics to interviewers' evaluations will be minor as compared to the relative importance of interviewees' job-related competencies.

Over the years, two specific structured interview formats (*behavior description and situational interviews*) have be-

come increasingly popular. Behavior description interviews (BDIs) use past-oriented questions dealing with previous job or life experiences (Janz, 1982). Conversely, situational interviews (SIs) contain questions that are future-oriented, placing applicants in a hypothetical job-relevant situation and asking them how they would respond (Latham, Saari, Pursell, & Campion, 1980). Besides the structured interviewing practices heretofore mentioned, each of these formats incorporates additional safeguards for limiting interviewers' sensitivity to IM. On the one hand, prescribed SI guidelines posit that the hypothetical job-related situation put forward by the interviewer consists of a dilemma (e.g., Klehe & Latham, 2005), which is expected to keep the amount of impression management within bounds. This inclusion of a dilemma is an advantage of SIs as compared to BDIs wherein the interviewee is free to choose a job-related situation. On the other hand, BDIs focus on real episodes of past behavior instead of interviewees' answers to hypothetical situations. Clearly, it might be more difficult to present oneself more favorably in these past situations (BDIs) than in hypothetical ones (SIs). Given that each of these structured formats includes different safeguards for reducing interviewers' sensitivity to IM, we posit a nondirectional hypothesis. *Hypothesis 2* posits that the relative importance of IM tactics to interviewers' evaluations will be different in SIs as compared to BDIs.

Apart from structured interviewing practices, it might also be assumed that *interviewers with more years of interviewing experience* are less sensitive to IM. It has been claimed that experienced interviewers' evaluations are less biased, more reliable, less influenced by irrelevant factors, and more valid than those of inexperienced interviewers (Dipboye & Jackson, 1999). In sharp contrast to these claims, the empirical evidence in favor of the superiority of experienced interviewers is meager (Barr & Hitt, 1986; Macan & Dipboye, 1988; Marlowe, Schneider, & Nelson, 1996). On a more general level, Camerer and Johnson (1991) summarized research on expert judgment in various fields and concluded that experts predict poorly because either their knowledge base is biased or they use heuristics when applying their knowledge. Thus, there exists a discrepancy between the theoretical claims about the superiority of expert information processing and the empirical evidence. Given that no prior empirical research has examined how interview experience impacts on sensitivity to IM, we decided to ground our hypothesis on the theoretical claims. Thus, *Hypothesis 3* posits that in structured interviews the relative importance of IM tactics to interviewers' evaluations will be higher among student (inexperienced) interviewers as compared to professional (experienced) interviewers.

IM Versus Job-Related Competencies

As a second contribution of this study, we examine the effects of applicants' IM use on interview outcomes vis-à-vis the effects of applicants' standing on job-related competen-

cies. This is because interviewers do not make overall evaluations without evaluating some relevant job-competencies first, especially in the case of structured interviews. However, applicants' standing on job-related competencies were seldom taken into account into prior IM analyses (see Kacmar et al., 1992; McFarland et al., 2003, for exceptions). For example, some studies used significant zero-order correlations between IM and overall evaluations as evidence that candidates' overall evaluations made by interviewers were prone to impression management (e.g., Ellis et al., 2002). Zero-order correlations provide only a crude indication of interviewers' sensitivity to IM. In fact, it might well be that the relative impact of IM is limited as compared to the impact of candidates' standing on relevant competencies in highly structured interviews. Other studies controlled for grade point average (e.g., Higgins & Judge, 2004; Kristof-Brown et al., 2002; Stevens & Kristof, 1995) or perceived competence (Howard & Ferris, 1996) in a regression or structural equation model when examining the influence of IM on interviewer ratings. Clearly, these factors are not the same as direct interview ratings of job-related competencies.

Study Objectives

This study examines interviewers' sensitivity to IM in structured interviews. The moderating effect of two factors is examined: type of interview (behavior description vs. situational) and interviewer experience (student vs. professional). Interviewers' sensitivity to IM is investigated by determining the relative importance that interviewers attach to (verbal and nonverbal) IM as compared to predetermined competencies.

Method

Participants

Two samples of participants (*interviewers*) were used. The first sample consisted of 55 Master I/O psychology students (44 women, 11 men, mean age = 20.69 years, SD = 0.88 years). The second sample was composed of 18 professional interviewers (10 men, 8 women, mean age = 33.50 years, SD = 5.34 years), who were recruited from well-known consultancy firms. Only interviewers with at least 2 years of structured interviewing experience were recruited. Professional interviewers were paid $250 for their participation. On average, professional interviewers had 8.78 years of interview experience (SD = 5.33).

Development of Videotapes and Coding of IM Tactics

Videotapes were made of 88 students (51% male; mean age = 22 years, SD = 1.21 years) who were screened for an actual training program in communication skills and group processes. This training program was part of a yearly course that was given to students majoring in engineering or information sciences (60%), psychology (30%), and medicine and health sciences (7%). The screening aimed to provide an assessment of students' standing on training-related competencies. In light of this screening, candidates completed questionnaires and were interviewed. Interview questions dealt with three competencies (one question was asked per competency: interpersonal skills, adaptability, and perseverance), with the order of the questions being counterbalanced. We also instructed students to make the best impression on the interviewer.

The verbal and nonverbal IM tactics of the 88 videotaped candidates were frequency-coded by four trained I/O psychology graduate students (4 females, mean age = 22 years). This training and the coding approaches were similar to those of previous studies (Ellis et al., 2002; McFarland et al., 2003; Stevens & Kristof, 1995) and can be obtained from the authors. Interrater agreement (kappas above .70) was satisfactory for all IM categories. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion.

In this study, we used absolute IM frequencies instead of relative frequencies (i.e., IM tactic use divided by interview duration) because we examined the impact of IM tactic use and competency ratings on overall interview evaluations. Interview duration cannot be a confounding factor because interview duration influences *both* IM tactics and competency ratings.

Check of Realism of Videotapes

The 18 professional interviewers rated the realism of the videotaped interviews on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *very unrealistic*, 7 = *very realistic*). The mean realism rating was 6.00 (SD = 0.69). As the videotaped candidates were not mock interviewees but participants of a screening for an actual training program, these good realism results are not surprising.

Procedure

The conditions under which the student and professional interviewers viewed the candidates were identical. Each interviewer was randomly assigned either videotaped BDI candidates or videotaped SI candidates. Student interviewers saw on average 7.18 interviewees, whereas professional interviewers saw on average 9.5 interviewees. Interviewers were provided with behaviorally anchored rating scales (as devel-

Table 1. Means and standard deviations of study variables, and intercorrelations between interviewers' evaluations of candidates and candidates' IM use, in the student interviewer sample, with each evaluation as an independent event (N = 395) and in the professional interviewer sample, with each evaluation as an independent event (N = 172)

	M	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	M	SD
1. Overall evaluation (BDI)	14.24	3.44	–	–	.68***	.72***	.75***	.02	.40***	.07	.12	14.43	3.97
2. Overall evaluation (SI)	13.20	3.35	–	–	.68***	.57***	.64***	.29**	.05	.11	.30**	11.73	2.96
3. Interpersonal skills	4.81	1.44	.63***	.53***	–	.48***	.44***	–.01	.30	.07	.21	4.47	1.46
4. Adaptability	4.23	1.92	.66***	.34***	.19***	–	.48***	–.08	.30	.17	.28	4.25	1.63
5. Perseverance	4.40	1.67	.68***	.54***	.28***	.23***	–	.04	.24	.08	.26	4.47	1.49
6. Other-focused IM	.90	1.16	.02	.11	.10	–.06	.03	–	–.05	–.14	–.01	.85	1.17
7. Self-focused IM	1.39	1.46	.35***	.10	.20	.21	.31	–.03	–	.13	.43***	1.47	1.50
8. Defensive IM	1.23	1.28	.07	.16*	–.05	.19	.17	–.15**	.13*	–	.32***	1.23	1.27
9. Nonverbal IM	93.83	37.79	.22**	.15*	.08	.22	.29	.00	.45***	.32***	–	96.42	38.31

Notes. ***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05. Each of the overall evaluation ratings was the sum of the three items wherein interviewers were asked to generally evaluate the candidate on a 7-point scale. The competency ratings were also made on a 7-point scale. The IM variables indicate the number of times the IM tactic occurred. Only the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of the overall evaluations are split by interview format. BDI = Behavior Description Interview; SI = Situational Interview. Results of the student interviewer sample are below the diagonal, results of the professional interviewer sample are above the diagonal.

oped by Oswald, Schmitt, Kim, Ramsay, & Gillespie, 2004) and they independently rated each competency (interpersonal skills, adaptability, and perseverance) on a 7-point scale immediately after the response of the interviewee (see Peeters & Lievens, 2006). After each interview, they gave an overall evaluation on three items (α = .91 in both samples) using a 7-point scale (1 = *poor*, 7 = *excellent*). An example item was "How do you evaluate this candidate in general?" Average interrater reliabilities (intraclass correlations) for the overall evaluations were .80 (three student interviewers) and .78 (two professional interviewers).

Analyses

Regression analyses are typically conducted to capture the policy that interviewers used to determine interviewees' overall interview performance (e.g., Graves & Karren, 1992). Yet, when intercorrelations among predictors exist, regression coefficients have long been judged inadequate to indicate the relative importance of a predictor (Johnson & LeBreton, 2004). Therefore, we followed recommendations of Johnson and LeBreton (2004) and computed relative weights. According to Johnson and LeBreton (2004), these relative weights take a predictor's direct effect and its effect when combined with other predictors into account and yield importance weights that represent the proportionate contribution each predictor makes to R^2.

To assess the sensitivity of interviewers to IM tactics and job-related competencies, we conducted pooled relative weight analyses in both samples. The relative weights were then expressed as proportions of R^2.

Results

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics in both samples. As the IM tactics used were counted and added per candidate, the value of .90 for other-focused IM, for instance, refers to the mean frequency of other-focused IM tactics across all candidates in the interview. Table 1 further shows significant correlations between self-focused IM and overall BDI evaluations, between nonverbal IM and overall BDI evaluations, between defensive IM and overall SI evaluations, and between nonverbal IM and overall SI evaluations in the student interviewer sample. Similar results were found in the professional interviewer sample. However, these zero-order correlations are only a very broad measure. They do not provide information about the relative importance attached to IM as compared to the relative importance attached to relevant competencies.

Table 2 presents the relative weights (as percentages of R^2) for both question types (BDI vs. SI) in both samples. A bootstrap procedure (Johnson, 2004) was used to construct 95% confidence intervals around the relative weights. As can be seen in Table 2, the relative weights for the IM cues were significantly lower than the relative weights for the relevant competencies (as the confidence intervals did not overlap), for both question types. Thus, the ratings on the relevant competencies were significantly more important than IM cues in determining their overall evaluations. This supports Hypothesis 1.

Concerning the sensitivity to various IM tactics across interview formats (Hypothesis 2), student interviewers in BDIs attached most relative weight to self-focused verbal tactics (4.6%) and to a lesser extent to nonverbal tactics (2.4%). In SIs, they attached most relative weight to de-

Table 2. Relative weights and 95% confidence intervals, reflecting the relative importance of relevant competencies and IM tactics to the overall ratings, broken down by interview format and type of interviewer

	Student interviewers		Professional interviewers	
	BDI condition (*n* = 183)	SI condition (*n* = 212)	BDI condition (*n* = 88)	SI condition (*n* = 84)
Interpersonal skills	28.7% [18.6%–38.1%]	38.1% [23.7%–50.1%]	25.3% [17.2%–33.0%]	35.2% [18.7%–48.9%]
Adaptability	30.8% [22.1%–38.7%]	16.9% [7.1%–28.1%]	27.4% [17.1%–34.9%]	23.3% [12.9%-36.6%]
Perseverance	32.8% [24.8%–40.6%]	39.2% [26.6%–48.3%]	37.5% [26.7%–46.8%]	30.7% [17.1%-44.1%]
Other-focused IM	0.3% [0.2%–3.1%]	0.5% [0.1%–3.6%]	0.5% [0.2%–5.2%]	4.5% [0.7%–12.9%]
Self-focused IM	4.6% [1.7%–8.8%]	0.8% [0.5%–3.1%]	8.2% [3.1%–16.4%]	0.8% [0.3%–4.0%]
Defensive IM	0.5% [0.1%–2.5%]	3.2% [0.3%–9.5%]	0.7% [0.1%–4.2%]	2.0% [0.3%–9.0%]
Nonverbal IM	2.4% [0.3%–6.8%]	1.4% [0.4%–4.7%]	0.3% [0.1%–3.9%]	3.5% [0.8%–8.7%]
R^2	.704	.552	.794	.715

Note. BDI = Behavior Description Interview; SI = Situational Interview. Values in brackets refer to the 95% confidence intervals around the relative weights.

fensive tactics (3.2%) and to a lesser extent to nonverbal tactics (1.4%). Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

Related to Hypothesis 3, our finding that student interviewers' ratings on the relevant competencies were significantly more important than IM cues in determining overall evaluations seems to generalize to professional interviewers. This does not lend support to Hypothesis 3. The only differences found across samples were that in SIs professional interviewers seemed to attach most relative weight to other-focused verbal tactics (4.5%) and to a lesser extent to nonverbal tactics (3.5%), which is a different result as compared to the student sample. As suggested by an anonymous reviewer, we also examined whether the gender of the interviewer determined sensitivity to IM tactics. Results showed that for both male and female student interviewers, impression management tactics played a minor role.

As a final check of our results, we conducted pooled regression analyses per sample and interview format wherein interviewer was included as a control variable. This was done to control for the dependency in our data (e.g., Rotundo & Sackett, 2002). In these analyses, the interviewer variable was dummy coded and added as a first block. Next, we added the competency variables. The IM tactics were added in a final block. Results confirmed our original results. In all these regression analyses, the large majority of variance was explained by the competency variables. IM tactics did not have any significant or practical contribution to the variance explained.

Discussion

Our most important finding was that the importance of IM tactics was relatively small as compared to the importance attached to job-related competencies. So, we found that competency ratings were more important in determining overall evaluations than applicants' IM tactics. This was a robust finding as it was found in both samples. We emphasize that this does *not* mean that the impact of IM is negligible. Instead, our results suggest that the impact of IM should be put in a broader perspective as it seems to be relatively small *compared to* more relevant cues. Note that this conclusion cannot be derived from bivariate correlations between IM tactics and overall evaluations. Therefore, this study underscores the importance of examining job-relevant factors *and* biasing factors together. Otherwise research findings "may reflect the artificial nature of studies that … have the tendency to examine bias variables alone rather than with variables reflecting more relevant characteristics of the applicant" (Raza & Carpenter, 1987, p. 597).

Although the relative impact of IM was relatively small, there were some differences across structured interview formats. In BDIs, interviewers in both samples attached most relative weight to self-focused verbal tactics. In SIs, students attached most relative weight to defensive tactics, whereas professional interviewers attached most relative weight to other-focused verbal tactics. Some of these results might be due to the type of questions asked in these structured interview formats. For instance, in BDIs inter-

viewers use job-related questions that deal with previous job or life experiences. Hence, interviewers using the BDI format (instead of the SI format) might be more sensitive to cues from applicants boasting about their past accomplishments (i.e., self-focused IM).

A final finding was that both student and professional interviewers were approximately to the same extent sensitive to IM. This result is in line with Camerer and Johnson's (1991) disappointing conclusions about expert judgments in various fields. It also suggests that it makes little sense to invest in methods for increasing interviewers' expertise (e.g., via interviewing workshops) for reducing interviewers' sensitivity to IM. It should be noted, though, that the high degree of interview structure might have reduced individual differences among interviewers and therefore the potential beneficial effects of experience.

Although we tried as best as we could to ensure the realism of our study by including actual candidates (instead of written interview transcripts), some generalizability caveats are warranted. First, the interviews were conducted as part of a screening for a training program. This context differs from a typical hiring context. Probably, candidates were less prepared for the interviews than in a real hiring context. However, it should be noted that participants were visibly nervous, indicating that they took this screening seriously. Next, interviewers evaluated videotaped candidates. The fact that interviewers had no face-to-face contact might have affected our results (e.g., the impact of nonverbal behaviors). A final limitation is related to the relatively small sample size (55 students and 18 professional consultants). However, relatively small samples are not uncommon in studies with interviewers as units of analysis (e.g., Graves & Karren, 1992).

Future research should examine the relative importance of IM in other interview formats, such as less structured interviews and panel interviews. Future studies might also examine how individual differences (locus of control, need for cognition, or self-monitoring) among interviewers influence their sensitivity to IM. Similar to Tsai et al. (2005), other moderators such as the amount of customer contact and interview length also deserve attention. Finally, one might scrutinize the interviewer-applicant interaction processes for shedding light on the respective IM tactics being used.

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