

RESEARCH BRIEFS

DO SELF-PRESENTATION TACTICS OF JOB INTERVIEWEES VARY ACROSS CULTURES?

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RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Imagine you are recruiting for Google, a “premiere” employer that hires qualified candidates from all over the world. You know that candidates often have a tendency to present themselves in the best possible light to maximize their chances of landing the job. As a consequence, you will need to filter the truth from any exaggerations or other impression-management tactics encountered during the job interview process. Complicating matters, however, is that candidates from different cultures might diverge in how they present themselves in job interviews. After all, it is common knowledge that Americans, for example, are socialized to self-enhance their individual contributions, whereas Japanese are socialized to focus on the group and not exaggerate their individual contributions. So how can the interviewer account for any cultural differences in how job candidates self-present? In other words, how do you recalibrate your “B.S. meter” for each culture?

This is precisely what was recently studied by a group of researchers representing a wide cross-section of cultures: Gro M. Sandal, Hege H. Bye, David L. Sam, Kristine Kjellsen (all from University of Bergen, Norway), Fons van de Vijver (Tilburg University, North-West University, South Africa and University of Queensland, Australia), Benjamin Amponsah (University of Ghana), Nigar Cakar (Düzce University, Turkey), Gabriele H. Franke (University of Applied Sciences, Psychology of Rehabilitation, Germany), Rosnah Ismail (University of Malaysia Perlis), Ankica Kotic (Sapienza – University of Rome, Italy), Anna Leontieva (National Research University Higher School of Economics, Russia), Shahrnaz Mortazavi (University of Shahid Beheshti, Iran), and Catherine Tien-Lun Sun (Hong Kong Shue Yan University).

Specifically, they examined how job candidates differ across 10 national cultures in (1) the extent to which they engage in impression management, and (2) the specific tactics they use to self-present in job interviews. Four impression-management

tactics were investigated: assertiveness (e.g., expressing enthusiasm, confidence, self-discipline), emphasizing individual excellence (e.g., portraying an image of individual superiority, focusing on personal strength, taking credit for accomplishments), accommodation (i.e., willingness to accommodate to the job), and pointing out obstacles (i.e., strategies aimed at preserving *face*, such as apologies, justification, and excuses to explain away negative performance).

To form hypotheses about how different cultures influence impression management in job interviews, Sandal and her colleagues relied on cultural value theory (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1990). Cultural value theory classifies cultures along three value dimensions: (1) embeddedness vs. autonomy (finding meaning in life through social relationships and belonging versus through expressing one’s uniqueness), (2) egalitarianism vs. hierarchy (the extent to which a culture sees the unequal distribution of roles, power, and resources as legitimate or not), and (3) mastery vs. harmony (the extent to which a culture emphasizes mastery over harmony with the natural and social world).

Sandal and her colleagues hypothesized that the impression-management efforts of job candidates would be greater in cultures that value embeddedness, hierarchy, and mastery than in cultures that value autonomy, egalitarianism, and harmony. They also considered affluence as an important factor, hypothesizing that individuals from affluent societies are less likely to engage in impression management than individuals from less affluent societies, because the former don’t need to conform to higher-status individuals as much as the latter.

With respect to the specific impression-management tactics that individuals engage in across cultures, Sandal and her colleagues hypothesized that cultures that value embeddedness (vs. autonomy) are more (vs. less) likely to engage in the impression-management tactics of accommodation and pointing out obstacles. They hypothesized that cultures that value mastery (vs. harmony) are more (vs. less)

likely to engage in the impression-management tactics of assertiveness, accommodation, and individual excellence. Finally, they hypothesized that cultures that value hierarchy (vs. egalitarianism) are more (vs. less) likely to engage in the impression-management tactics of accommodation and individual excellence.

STUDY DESIGN AND METHOD

To investigate these hypotheses, Sandal and her colleagues collected survey data from 3,509 university students across ten countries: Germany, Ghana, Hong Kong, Iran, Italy, Malaysia, Norway, Russia, Turkey, and the United States. The Cultural Impression Management Scale–Applicant Form (CIM-A) was used to measure the extent to which participants engaged in impression management, and the degree to which they engaged in the four specific impression-management tactics studied. Prior research has shown that the CIM-A is valid across cultures. The level of affluence across countries was measured by their GDP and Gini coefficient. Country scores on the three cultural value dimensions identified were taken from Schwartz’s value survey.

In order to ensure that the scores of participants on the CIM-A were comparable across cultures, Sandal and her colleagues performed both structural equivalence and scalar equivalence analyses. Since the sample size at the country level ($N=10$) was too small to test a multilevel model, the study hypotheses were tested with a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to assess the impact of culture and gender (a control variable) on self-presentation tactics.

KEY FINDINGS

The structural equivalence and scalar equivalence analyses indicated that the scores of participants on the CIM-A were indeed comparable across cultures. Therefore, the cross-cultural differences identified in the study were likely to be meaningful. The MANOVA supported all of the hypotheses, suggesting that there are indeed great variations across cultures in the extent to which job interviewees engage in impression management as well as the types of tactics they favored. Furthermore, the analyses supported the notion that cultural values on the three dimensions (i.e., embeddedness vs. autonomy, hierarchy vs. egalitarianism, and mastery vs. harmony) influenced impression-management tactics in job interviews as predicted. On average, 44% of the variance in

self-presentation tactics was explained by cultural differences.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Sandal and her colleagues demonstrated that individuals do differ across cultures in how they engage in impression management during job interviews. This has serious implications for recruiters who interview candidates from multiple countries. Moreover, a few results merit more specific reflection.

First, it is interesting to note that the impression-management tactics that varied the most across cultures were individual excellence and pointing out obstacles. A cluster of countries, including Ghana, Hong Kong, Iran, and Malaysia, scored high on both tactics. Put another way, job candidates from these countries may tend to adopt a defensive self-presentation approach—one where they highlight external factors as explanations for their performance failures.

Another interesting finding was that certain West European countries (e.g., Germany, Italy, Norway) tend to score lower on all self-presentation tactics. By contrast, the U.S. scored high on all self-presentation tactics. These findings are consistent with a strong cultural practice of selling oneself in the U.S., contrasted with a stronger aversion for self-promotion in parts of Western Europe.

One of the more notable weaknesses of the study is its reliance on student samples, as opposed to working professionals. Naturally, students have more limited job-interviewing experience. Nevertheless, all respondents indicated they had interviewed for a job at least once, with many indicating they had done so several times.

So, what can recruiters at Google or other top international companies take from these findings? For one, they may want to consider using interviewers from the same culture as the interviewee. This might make it easier to spot and more accurately decipher the self-presentational tactics that tend to be used in particular cultural contexts. Indeed, multinational companies might want to consider delegating hiring in different countries to their local units for that reason. Another strategy might be to do more to educate corporate recruiters about how cultural values (including the dimensions studied by Sandal and her colleagues) influence impression-management tactics in job interviews. A result of this greater awareness might be more accurate assessments of what job candidates bring to the table, and, ultimately, a stronger track record of making good hires.

REFERENCES

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