

Much ado about nothing? Impression Management Behavior and the Criterion Related Validity of Assessment Centers

Introduction

Impression Management (IM) is often viewed with great concern in the context of personnel selection because it is feared to reduce the accuracy of selection decisions (Hogan, Barrett, & Hogan, 2007): Candidates have been found to use especially assertive IM behaviors, i.e. proactive image construction (Kleinmann & Klehe, 2011), which predicts performance evaluations particularly in selection interviews (Barrick, Shaffer, & DeGrassi, 2009). Studies on the effects of candidates' IM in Assessment Centers are still rare, however, and inconclusive (McFarland, Ryan, & Kriska, 2003). The first goal of this study was thus to investigate whether candidates show assertive IM behaviors in Assessment Centers, and whether this in turn influences assessors' performance ratings. This study further extended previous research by focussing on candidates' performance ratings on particular performance dimensions rather than their overall performance. More specifically, it tested whether self-promotion, i.e. stressing one's extraordinary experiences, highlighting one's qualities, and pointing out one's accomplishments increases performance ratings on the dimension leadership, while ingratiation, i.e. expressing gratitude towards others, stressing similarity between oneself and the other, and praising the other enhances evaluations on the performance dimension cooperation.

Rather than viewing candidates' assertive IM behaviors as a source of measurement error, or worse, as a bias, in personnel selection, scholars have recently suggested that such IM behaviors could also be regarded as expressions of stable inter-individual dispositions (Van Iddekinge, McFarland, & Raymark, 2007). Building on the two-component model of IM (Leary & Kowalski, 1990) and on trait-activation theory (Tett & Guterman, 2000), the second goal of this study was to further shed light on this contrary viewpoint. Regarding IM as a behavioral manifestation of candidates' underlying traits (Peeters & Lievens, 2006) would imply that IM behaviors should be shown not only in selection situations, but also in comparable non-evaluated situations by the same individual. Such finding would suggest that IM is not a threat in personnel selection, as the same IM behaviors would be shown across situations and could thus even predict performance on the job. Furthermore, candidates' inter-individual differences in the use of IM may improve the internal construct-related validity of Assessment Centers, which is usually surprisingly low (Klimoski & Brickner, 1987). If IM is really a behavioral manifestation of a candidate's underlying dispositions, it would

consistently be used and should thus show internal construct-related validity within the Assessment Center.

This study thus extended previous research by investigating the effects of candidates' IM behaviors on distinctive performance dimensions in selection situations as well as during comparable, but non-evaluated situations. In addition, it aimed to shed more light on the current debate of whether candidates' assertive IM behaviors need to be regarded as a threat to the accuracy of selection decisions.

Methods

The Assessment Center was conducted under the framework of an application training program for prospective university graduates. Prior to the Assessment Centers, 60 graduate psychology students majoring in work and organizational psychology participated in a one-day observer training, preparing them to rate either candidates' assertive IM behaviors self-promotion and ingratiation or candidates' performance. Self-promotion was defined as stressing one's extraordinary experiences, highlighting one's qualities, and pointing out one's accomplishments, while ingratiation was defined as expressing gratitude towards others, stressing similarity between oneself and the other, and praising the other. For the performance dimensions, Kolk, Born and van der Flier (2003) proposed and successfully tested the use of a threefold taxonomy with the dimensions power, feeling, and thinking. The three performance dimensions leadership, cooperation, and planning were used in the context of this study to represent this triadic categorization. Leadership was defined as striving for and assuming responsibility for tasks and groups, coordination of teams, and arguing for one's point of view in groups, while cooperation was defined as assisting others with problems they may have, considering the needs of others, being prepared to compromise with others, and mediating between diverging points of view. Planning was described as prioritizing tasks, making plans for tasks and projects, making appointments in due time, and allocating tasks.

During the Assessment Centers, the 114 participants took part in three exercises (two group-discussions and one role-play) in which they were observed by the trained observers. Two observers per participant rated candidates' performance, while two other observers per participant rated candidates' assertive IM behaviors. Participants furthermore took part in two more exercises (one group-discussion and one role-play) where no observers were present in the room, resembling comparable, but non-evaluated situations. In those situations, participants were videotaped without their explicit knowledge. Two observers later rated candidates' IM on the basis of these videotapes, while two other observers rated performance.

Results

In a manipulation check, 90% of the participants said that they behaved the same way they would have in an actual selection context. A paired-samples *t*-test revealed that candidates used significantly more self-promotion ($M = 3.56$; $SD = .67$) and ingratiation ($M = 3.48$; $SD = .61$) during the selection situations than during the comparable non-evaluated situations ($M = 2.71$; $SD = .58$; $t(114) = 11.42$, $p < .01$ for self-promotion and $M = 2.99$; $SD = .51$; $t(114) = 7.24$, $p < .01$ for ingratiation). Correlational analyses furthermore showed that both self-promotion and ingratiation were positively related to candidates' overall performance ratings in the selection situations ($r = .59$, $p < .01$ for self-promotion and $r = .59$, $p < .01$ for ingratiation). Concerning the effects of the IM tactics on different performance dimensions, it became evident that candidates' use of self-promotion was significantly related to their performance ratings on the dimension leadership ($r = .71$, $p < .01$). Likewise, candidates' use of ingratiation was significantly related to performance ratings on the dimension cooperation ($r = .38$, $p < .01$). Candidates thus made more use of self-promotion and ingratiation in the selection situations than in the non-evaluated situations. Their use of IM influenced overall performance ratings, and the two IM tactics had different effects when looking at the different performance dimensions.

Stepwise regression analyses and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) were used to test whether candidates' assertive IM behaviors during selection situations explained variance in their performance ratings during the non-evaluative situations. The results of the stepwise regression analyses showed that the self-promotion shown in selection situations was a significant predictor of performance ratings on the dimension leadership in non-evaluated situations ($\beta = .14$, $p < .05$), also when controlling for the effect of candidates' self-promotion during the non-evaluative situations. Likewise, ingratiation shown in selection situations was a significant predictor of performance ratings on the dimension cooperation during the non-evaluative situations ($\beta = .23$, $p < .01$), also when controlling for the effect of candidates' ingratiation during the non-evaluative situations. This finding supports the notion that candidates' assertive IM behaviors during selection situations predict their performance during non-evaluative situations. Analyses conducted via SEM using AMOS 5.0 (Arbuckle, 2003) yielded similar results. Model comparisons supported the notion that candidates' assertive IM behaviors during selection situations predict performance ratings during non-evaluative situations.

To investigate the construct-related validity of the Assessment Center's performance dimensions and IM tactics, multitrait-multimethod (MTMM) and SEM analyses of the correlated uniqueness (CU) model (Marsh, 1988) were conducted. Both analyses revealed that the internal construct-related validity of the performance dimensions within the Assessment Center was relatively poor (average $r_{\text{MTMM}} = .41$, representing convergent validity, were smaller than average $r_{\text{HTMM}} = .46$, representing discriminant validity). The construct-related validity of the IM tactics, however, was considerably higher (average $r_{\text{MTMM}} = .49$, representing convergent validity, were larger than average $r_{\text{HTMM}} = .39$, representing discriminant validity). The fit indices of the CU model furthermore suggested that the model fit the data well. Results thus revealed that the internal-construct related validity of IM dimensions was better than that of performance dimensions in the Assessment Center.

Discussion

The goal of the present study was twofold: First, it aimed at investigating whether the common finding that candidates use IM in selection interviews, and do so successfully, also holds for Assessment Centers. The second goal was to investigate whether the common conclusion that IM poses a threat to the accuracy of selection situations is justified.

Concerning the first goal, this study revealed that similar to selection interviews, candidates also made use of the two assertive IM tactics self-promotion and ingratiation in an Assessment Center. Conceptually new is the finding that candidates indeed showed *more* assertive IM behaviors during the Assessment Center than during comparable but non-evaluative performance situations. Self-promotion and ingratiation enhanced candidates' performance ratings in the Assessment Center, with particularly strong effects on conceptually related performance dimensions (self-promotion and leadership versus ingratiation and cooperation).

Yet, the study also showed that candidates' assertive IM behaviors may not pose quite such a threat to the accuracy of selection decisions as previously assumed. Rather, candidates' self-promotion and ingratiation during the selection context predicted their performance ratings on the dimensions leadership and cooperation in non-evaluated situations. Furthermore, these IM dimensions showed satisfactory internal construct-related validity. These results speak for the notion that candidates' IM expresses as a consistent inter-individual difference variable rather than a measurement error in personnel selection. Candidates' assertive IM behaviors may thus reflect a behavioral expression of underlying traits. Both in selection and in non-evaluated situations, candidates' assertive IM behaviors

predicted their performance ratings on differential dimensions. Candidates thus do not only react to the high demands of selection situations with increased use of IM, but rather act according to underlying dispositions.

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