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American Professionalism: Contents and Consequences of an Organizational Role Schema

Emily Heaphy
Stephen M. Ross School of Business
at the University of Michigan

Jeffrey Sanchez-Burks
Stephen M. Ross School of Business
at the University of Michigan

Susan Ashford
Stephen M. Ross School of Business
at the University of Michigan

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Emily Heaphy, Jeffrey Sanchez-Burks and Susan Ashford

University of Michigan

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Abstract

Research in impression management, sociology, and cultural psychology suggests that socio-historical and cultural conditions have shaped people's "professional" role schema in the contemporary United States. Building on these literatures, we examined evidence that contemporary professional role schemas reflect historical trends of minimizing personal references at work. In Study 1, working managers reconstructed the office of a target presumed to have (or not have) a professional reputation. Results show when participants' professional role schemas are invoked, participants assembled the office with significantly fewer objects symbolic of personal life but with similar numbers of work-related and neutral objects. Moreover, this effect was moderated by participant's tenure in the U.S., suggesting this standard of professionalism may be culturally specific. A second study showed that a job candidate's success was significantly lowered by the mere suggestion that they would make minor references to personal topics in a hypothetical client meeting. Implications for the implicit cultural standards that guide identity work in organizations are discussed.

American Professionalism:

Contents and Consequences of an Organizational Role Schema

Spend much time in work organizations in the United States and you will soon hear the word "professional" to describe an exemplary employee or to reprimand one who is not behaving appropriately. For many people, developing a reputation as a professional is an important impression-management goal because it signals that one is capable of meeting the technical and social demands of their jobs (Reardon, 2001; Roberts, forthcoming), and thus is one way of achieving the rewards organizations can provide, such as social approval, power, well-being, and career success (Baumeister, 1982; Leary and Kowalski, 1990; Rosenfeld, Giacolone, and Riordan, 2002). At the organizational level, systems and structures are designed to recruit people who will act professionally and to support firm cultures that will encourage professional behavior. Though treated as if its meaning is clear, the word 'professional' is imbued with implicit and tacit meanings about appropriate behavior at work. Employees are often left to learn how to act professionally through direct and indirect cues from their social environments (Ibarra, 1999). Considering its pervasiveness and ambiguity in employees' everyday work lives, the implicit standards of professionalism are an important theoretical and empirical topic for individuals and organizations, and the focus of the present research.

In organizations, as elsewhere in life, people attempt to convey impressions that fit desired social roles, using standards that may or may not be explicit (Goffman, 1959, 1967). Researchers trying to understand these organizational dynamics often examine how people work to convey particular images, and how organizational contexts make particular identities meaningful. For example, we know that social roles are conveyed and inferred through cues such as clothing (Pratt and Rafaeli, 1997; Rafaeli et al., 1997), office décor (Donald, 1994; Elsbach,

2004), and behaviors (Ibarra, 1999). Organizational scholars have contributed to our understanding of how organizational contexts affect how people construct their identities in organizations. For example, the way female lawyers enact their gender identity varies as a function of the proportional representation of women at the highest level of their employing law firms (Ely, 1995). An organization's industry influences the type of office symbols that signal a particular valued identity such as 'whiz-kid' or 'company geek' (Elsbach, 2004). Within the context of a hospital, nurses convey feelings and opinions about their roles and issues in their hospital through how they dress (Pratt and Rafaeli, 1997). Together, this research shows the multiple tactics people use to convey impressions and how organizational contexts influence the local standards of social roles.

Impression-management literature, however, focuses less frequently on the implicit standards and expectations associated with social roles themselves. Social roles are an important part of the impression-construction process because they carry expectations about the behaviors people in these roles will exhibit (Katz and Kahn, 1978; Leary and Kowalski, 1990). Thus, they provide standards and goals for people hoping to convey a particular impression (e.g., a medical student trying to convey the impression that she is a qualified medical professional), and criteria for the person who is evaluating the conveyed image (e.g., the patient who is evaluating whether the medical student is actually a qualified doctor). Social roles can be based on occupations or particular work, such as doctor or nurse, or they can be more general, such as that of a professional.

In this paper we elaborate the implicit standards people use to form one consequential impression in organizations, that of being seen as "professional." We combine the literature on impression management with research in sociology and cultural psychology to examine evidence

for how broader socio-historical and cultural conditions have shaped the role schema of what it means to be professional in contemporary American organizations. By focusing our analysis on the role schema itself, we show how the impression-management process can be influenced by broad cultural and historical trends. Specifically, we propose that macro-level trends can shape the expectations and standards associated with a social role, which in turn affects the identity construction component of impression management (Leary and Kowalski, 1990). We see this research strategy as one way to incorporate macro-level trends into the impression-management literature.

We also examine the personal and organizational consequences of conforming to or deviating from this role schema and whether consequences vary as a function of one's gender or nationality. By examining how a target's gender and nationality affect perceived congruence with the role schema, we gain greater understanding into the schema's contents. In addition, if expectations vary for how men and women, Americans and non-Americans convey and fit with the professional role schema, we can make theoretical and practical contributions to literatures that address inequities in organizations. In sum, our goal is to provide a novel perspective on an important and pervasive role schema that orients everyday and management behavior in organizations.

Professional Role Schema

We conceptualize the meanings and expectations people attach to the notion of being professional as a shared role schema. Role schemas refer to cognitions about the attributes and behaviors expected of a person in a particular role (Sarbin and Allen, 1968; Fiske and Taylor, 1991). As with other schemas, role schemas guide interpretations and evaluations of schema-relevant information. For example, people may have a waiter role schema that entails greeting

diners, taking their orders, and bringing those orders to the table. People who match this schema will be perceived as a waiter. Thus, role schemas contain information about appropriate attributes and behaviors associated with the role (Leary and Kowalski, 1990).

Role schemas can focus on highly specific roles within a firm or industry, such as the waiter described above, and on more broad-based roles that transcend firm and industry boundaries, such as 'moral leader' or 'professional.' Combinations across levels are also possible (e.g., 'a professional software engineer' and 'an unprofessional restaurant inspector'). People develop role schemas through experiences in particular socio-cultural contexts. Over time, exposure to direct and indirect messages about appropriate and inappropriate role behavior shape what becomes taken-for-granted knowledge about particular roles within a culture (Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Budhwar and Sparrow, 2002).

The professional role schema is most likely a multifaceted construct, one having several associations including tidiness (Elsbach, 2003, 2004) and adherence to disciplinary or occupational rules and norms (Perrow, 1986). Moreover there may be substantive variation in how people convey professionalism across firms and industries (Hall, 1968). In the present study, we focus on one potential characteristic of the professional role schema rooted in U.S. history and culture, namely an emphasis on minimizing markers of the personal sphere of one's life. In the next section we review theoretical and empirical research from sociology and cultural psychology to develop hypotheses about this potential characteristic of the American professional role schema.

Historical Development of the American Meaning of "Professionalism"

A key development in the evolution of the meaning of American professionalism in contemporary organizations has been traced to period of U.S. industrialization (circa 1870 to

1900). This period witnessed a rapid movement in the workforce from rural to urban areas and a separation between the social spheres of work and home (Weber, 1947; Bellah et al., 1996). The economy shifted from a farm-based economy with the family as the primary economic unit to an industrial one in which large organizations employed increasing numbers of people (Blau and Ferber, 1992). Though home and work had overlapped in an economy that relied on family labor in agricultural and craft settings, they became increasingly separate with industrialization and the growth of large organizations (Weber, 1947; Blau and Ferber, 1992). With urbanization and the expansion of large organizations, owners and managers wanted to develop a workforce whose loyalty to the organization would not be strained by commitments to family, whether those other commitments were a sick child, crop cycles, or personal corruption and nepotism (Wiebe, 1967). To deal with this organizational challenge, owners and managers institutionalized norms and inculcated the mindset of separating workers' work from their home and personal life.

As work came to be viewed as a public activity, it increasingly required a public presentation of a carefully constructed self (Nippert-Eng, 1996). Over time, the definition of a good worker became one who could perform his or her duties without regard to family ties, free from the possible influence of nepotism and responsibilities that might hinder work performance on behalf of the organization (Acker, 1990). Presenting oneself consistent with this norm became the mark of a "professional" worker. The underlying principle became, "While you are here, you will *act as though* you have no other loyalties, no other life" (Kanter, 1977: 15, italics in the original), despite, perhaps ironically, a tendency to use a worker's marital status as an indicator of stability and potential for loyalty to the organization.

While individual workers abided by this definition of professionalism to ensure personal success, groups of workers also championed this norm to gain control over their domains of

work. By claiming professional status, occupation members increased their prestige, visibility, and perceived expertise (Abbott, 1988). For example, beginning in the 1880s, bookkeepers and accountants initiated occupation-wide examinations, held conventions and eventually founded the Journal of Accountancy in an effort to increase the status of their work. In the 1890s, schoolteachers organized as a profession and gained both status and job security. As competition expanded in fast-growing cities, the number of occupations claiming professional status also increased (Kocka, 1980). As more people began working in formal organizations after industrialization and more occupations began claiming professional status, the notion of minimizing personal references at work may have become an enduring part of the professional role schema.

Many trends that followed in the wake of U.S. industrialization were also felt in other countries as they grappled with the changes that followed industrial development. What made the American experience different, according to Weber (1947), was that these trends were reinforced by a preexisting deep-seated ideology regarding the importance of putting aside relational concerns while working—an ideology that has been traced back to the country's founding communities (Lenski, 1963; Bendix, 1977; Sanchez-Burks, 2004). Those preexisting beliefs, described in more recent social psychology research as Protestant Relational Ideology, originated from the early Calvinists' tenet that attention to relational concerns distracted one from performing one's calling in life, that is, daily work (Sanchez-Burks, 2002). Over time, this belief was secularized and incorporated into the ethos of American culture (Weber, 1904; Lenski, 1963; Fischer, 1989). Industrialization ignited this ideology, spreading and institutionalizing it throughout society. As characterized by Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (1993: 133), the

"world [became] split between the machine and the suburban garden, producing and consuming. No intimacy, affection, brotherhood, or rootedness is supposed to sully the world of work."

Together this research suggests the notion of a divide between work and personal concerns in the U.S. predated industrialization but became institutionalized *en masse* during that period. These interlocking historical developments created what may be a distinctly U.S. meaning of professionalism. In the next section we describe an initial study that examined evidence for the propositions that (a) minimization of references to one's personal life is a component of the professional role schema among contemporary workers, and (b) while this standard is widely shared among Americans, it is less common among people from other cultures. In a second study, a field experiment with industry job recruiters directly assessed the consequences of deviating from this role schema.

Study 1: Professional Role Schemas and Office Décor

Anthropologists have argued that important cultural meanings are embodied in symbols (Geertz, 1973; Ortner, 1973; Sperber, 1996), suggesting that meanings attached to what it means to be "professional" would also be manifested through symbolic cues, such as in the artifacts people display in their offices. This reasoning is consistent with recent organizational studies showing how people confer particular identities upon office occupants based on the content of their office décor (Pratt and Rafaeli, 2001; Gosling et al., 2002; Elsbach, 2004). The theoretical analysis of the present research suggests that symbols tied specifically to a person's work versus personal life are particularly relevant to the perception of someone as professional. To the extent that minimizing personal references at work is part of the professional role schema, then restricting the amount of symbolic references to one's personal life (e.g., displaying a child's

finger paintings or friend's photograph) ought to be a significant differentiator between those considered or not considered to be professional.

To examine these issues, we developed a social cognition paradigm that could measure people's professional role schema. In this paradigm, participants are given an image of an office cubicle containing only a desk and empty shelves along with a separate sheet of self-adhesive stickers of work-related items (e.g., stapler, file folder), neutral items (e.g., plant, fan), and personal-related items (e.g., child's stick-figure drawings, personal photographs). Managers were asked to use the items to reconstruct what they believed a person's office might look like. The hypothetical office occupant was described as a high-performer who was married with two children; the office occupant was either a male or female, who either was or was not considered professional. This paradigm provided a way to test whether minimization of personal references at work is part of people's mental standards of professionalism and whether these standards are applied differently as a function of gender.

This task builds on the work of others who have shown that office décor is used by people to interpret the identity of its occupant, including the occupant's level of professionalism (Witkin, 1990; Gosling et al., 2002; Elsbach, 2004). For example, this study allows us to examine a qualitative finding of Elsbach (2004), who found that people associate neatness with professionalism and perceive a person with an unprofessional reputation as having a more cluttered office compared to someone with a professional reputation. In our research design, this would lead to the following prediction:

> H1: The professional role schema includes a standard of neatness or lack of clutter, such that participants will reconstruct the office of a target labeled unprofessional with more items overall compared to a target labeled professional.

One of the main implications of our theoretical analysis based on previous sociological and social psychological research is that the minimization of references to one's personal life is part of the professional role schema. Thus we made the following prediction:

H2: The professional role schema includes a standard of minimizing personal references in the workplace, such that participants will use more items associated with a person's personal life to reconstruct the office of a target labeled unprofessional compared to a target labeled professional.

Based on the unique confluence of socio-historical and cultural events in the U.S., the association between a professional role schema and the minimization of personal references at work is proposed to be characteristic of mainstream American culture rather than a universal belief. If the minimization of personal references at work is indeed an "American" dimension of professionalism, we expect to find that participants with less exposure to U.S. culture (e.g., recent immigrants or international students who remained in the U.S. after college) will be less likely to associate the minimization of personal references within the professional role schema. To examine evidence that would support this proposition we made the following predictions:

H3: The tendency to use more items associated with a person's personal life to reconstruct the office of a target labeled unprofessional and fewer items for a target labeled professional will vary as a function of participant's number of years living in the U.S.; the more years a participant has lived in the U.S., the more likely the participant will be to display this tendency.

Professional Role Schema and Gender Schemas

The image of the professional worker may also entail specific gendered expectations. A core phenomenon of the U.S. industrialization, according to Kanter (1977), was a gendered association of men with paid work and the public sphere, and women with unpaid, domestic work and the private sphere. Large organizations in particular began to value married men because their responsibilities to their family would presumably make them particularly dependent on the organizations for an income (Kanter, 1977).

However, since 1900, women's labor force participation rates, particularly in large organizations, have risen substantially (Amott and Matthaei, 1996). Increased participation of women in the paid labor force began primarily in sex-segregated jobs, such as clerical workers, social workers, and teachers, but since the 1970s women have entered historically male occupations and job categories in increasing numbers (Costa, 2000). As a result, the implicit definition of the ideal worker as a married man may have diluted to the point that historically gendered connotations do not affect contemporary meanings of American professionalism more broadly. If this is the case, then we would expect the same proportion of personal items to be used whether the office is occupied by a man or a woman. Alternatively, research has shown that social practices (Ely and Meyerson, 2000) and organizational structures like job titles (Strang and Baron, 1990) bear the gendered imprint of their founding conditions, which would suggest norms of professionalism remain gendered. In addition, impression-management research describes a strategy of social re-categorization, in which devalued identity is minimized (e.g., by being less gender stereotypic) and a more highly valued superordinate identity is emphasized in order to mitigate biases, prejudices, and discriminations (Tajfel, 1978; Roberts, forthcoming). Thus, women may take extra care to minimize personal references at work in order to deflect a

gender identity that could be perceived at odds with traditional professional identity. In support, Davis (1992) found that women physicians selected work clothing that directed patients' and colleagues' attention toward their occupation and away from their gender to convey legitimacy. Thus, the role schema of a professional female target might include fewer symbolic references to one's personal life than would be expected for a male target. Alternatively, participants may believe that women are more involved in the personal sphere (such as families and children), and are less role-prototypical than men. As a result, participants decorating the office of a woman would signal her non-work attachments and responsibilities with more personal items compared to men.

Because the literature supports competing hypotheses regarding influence of gender on the mental models of professionalism, specific *a priori* hypotheses regarding the influence of the target's gender are not possible. Nonetheless, our study was designed to provide empirical insight into this issue by examining whether the professional role schema varies as a function of the target's gender and the participants' gender. We accomplished this by including men and women in our sample and by varying the gender of the person portrayed as occupying the office participant's were asked to reconstruct.

Method

Participants

Ninety-five working managers enrolled in a part-time (evening) MBA program (67 men, 28 women, age: M=28, SD=4.13 years) participated in this study. Participants were sampled from a required course on organizational behavior. The ethnicity of the students was as follows: European-American/Caucasian, 52; Asian or Asian American, 35; Black or African American, 1;

Latin/Hispanic, 4; other, 3. All but one participant was employed at the time of the study; 54% worked in the auto industry with the remainder working in 25 other industries. The sample included 58.5% U.S.-born and 41.5% foreign-born participants. Among the latter group, participants had lived in the U.S. from one to 42 years (M=20.83, SD=10.63). There were no significant effects for participants' gender for any of the analyses, and this is not discussed further in the results section.

Materials

To create the experimental materials, a group of six university employees (staff, faculty, and students) generated a list of 95 items that might appear in an office (e.g., posters, calendars, pictures, plants) from observation of workspaces and discussion with the researchers. In order to obtain experimental materials of objects symbolic of work or personal domain, we pre-tested digital color images of these items with an independent sample (n = 18) who were asked to categorize each item on a 5-point Likert scale as work-related, neutral, or personal (-2 = very work-related, -1 = somewhat work-related, 0 = neither work nor personal, 1 = somewhat personal, 2 = very personal) and rate the visual clarity of the image (yes/no response). Only items that were rated as visually clear were further examined.

Twenty-seven personal objects were selected based on the criterion that the mean rating was equal or greater to 1, and 14 work-related objects were selected based on the criterion that the mean rating was equal or less than to –1. Finally, 26 neutral objects were selected based on the criterion that the mean rating was greater than -1 and less than 1 for a total of 67 objects. Examples of work-related objects included stapler, file folder, and calculator; neutral objects included a plant, a landscape painting, and a mug; and personal objects included family photos, posters of movie stars, religious symbols, and sports equipment. These thumbnail-size images

were printed on a sheet of individual self-adhesive stickers that could be removed and placed on a separate piece of paper containing an image of an office cubicle. This color image of an office cubicle appeared on an 11" x 17" sheet of paper. The image showed a three-wall cubicle containing a desk, empty bookshelves, chair, desktop computer, and telephone.

On the back of the office image was a typed description of the person participants were asked to imagine occupied that office. The description served as the experimental independent variable. One of four possible descriptions was provided. Each description was identical except for two characteristics, the target's gender (Stephanie or Eric) and reputation as being professional or unprofessional. These two variables were crossed to create four versions of the employee description (unprofessional woman, unprofessional man, professional woman, professional man). The description of the person imagined to occupy the office stated:

> *Eric (Stephanie) is a manager in his (her) mid-thirties, who has been with his (her) company for five years. He (she) is married and has two kids. Eric's (Stephanie's) performance evaluations are consistently strong, and he(she) is (not) considered very professional.*

Procedures

Working managers enrolled in an evening MBA class on organizational behavior participated in the study as part of an in-class exercise conducted in collaboration with the research team. Participants were asked to complete the exercise on 'workplace characteristics' and were told that the researchers would return in a later session to use the exercise as a basis for class discussion. After this introduction, we distributed a package containing the office image, the description of the person who occupied that office, and the self-adhesive stickers showing the office objects. Participants were asked to read the description of the office occupant and then use

the stickers to reconstruct what they believe that person's office looks like. We instructed them to use any objects they thought necessary, without any limitations. Participants completed the task individually in approximately 10 minutes. After completing the office task, participants were asked to complete a brief survey containing demographic questions and an item to measure the success of the manipulation ("Was the person occupying this office considered professional?" 5-point Likert scale, where 0= not at all, 4=very much). The first author returned to class later in the semester as a guest lecturer and used the exercise and its results as a basis for discussion about culture, beliefs about professionalism, and impression management.

Dependent Measure

For each participant we counted (a) the total number of objects used to reconstruct the office of the professional and unprofessional target and (b) the ratio of personal objects to the total number of objects. The first index provided a way to test whether tidiness is part of the professional role schema (H1), and the second to test for whether minimizing personal objects in particular is part of the professional role schema (H1-H3).

Results

Manipulation Check

To check that participants reconstructed the office with the intended image of a professional versus not professional employee, we conducted a one-way, between-subjects ANOVA on post-experiment ratings of the professionalism of the office occupant. The ANOVA showed that participants in the 'professional' condition provided significantly higher professionalism ratings ($M = 3.67$, $SD = .71$) compared to those in the 'not professional' condition ($M = 1.20$, $SD = .81$), $F(1,91) = 241.02$, $p < .001$, indicating that the manipulation was successful.

Office Clutter

A 2 (Professionalism: very professional vs. not very professional) X 2 (Target's Gender: male vs. female) ANOVA was conducted on total number of objects used to construct the office to examine the hypothesis (H1) that tidiness (or messiness) is part of the professionalism role schema. The ANOVA showed no reliable differences in the overall number of objects associated with a person who is considered professional (M = 17.33, SD = 4.67) versus not professional (M = 17.82, SD = 4.66), $F < 1$, or between a male target (M = 17.29, SD = 5.18) versus a female target (M = 17.86, SD = 4.14), $F < 1$. Moreover, there was no significant interaction between target's professionalism and gender, $F(1,91) = 2.86$, $p > .05$. These results do not support the notion that a tidy office is part of the professional role schema (H1).

Minimizing Personal References

A 2 (Professionalism: very professional vs. not very professional) X 2 (Target's Gender: male vs. female) ANOVA was conducted on the proportion of personal objects used to reconstruct the office of the target. As shown in Figure 1, there was a main effect of target's professionalism indicating that, as predicted (H2), a higher proportion of personal objects were used for a target not considered professional (M = .40, SD = .15) compared to a target labeled professional (M = .17, SD = .07), $F(1,91) = 88.99$, $p < .001$. Thus, it appears that the mental model of a professional entails restricting personal objects specifically, rather than all objects in general.

Insert Figure 1 About Here

There also was a main effect of target's gender indicating a smaller proportion of personal objects were used to reconstruct the office of a female target ($M = .26$, $SD = .15$), compared to an office of a male target ($M = .32$, $SD = 17$), $F(1,91) = 4.05$, $p = .05$. There was no significant interaction between the Professionalism condition and Target's Gender ($p > .25$). Together these results suggest that participants' expected women more than men to minimize personal references overall. Because the interaction was not significant, these findings suggest this notion is not linked to the professional role schema, but is a more broadly held view about gender in the workplace.

American Professionalism?

To examine whether minimizing the proportion of personal objects is part of the professional role schema for Americans in particular we regressed the proportion of personal objects on length of time participants had lived in the U.S., professional condition, and their interaction. Professional condition was coded as 0 = not professional, 1 = professional.

In the regression model, the main effect of Professionalism and Years lived in the U.S. were entered in the first step, and the interaction term was entered at the second step. All terms were centered prior to analysis to reduce issues of multi-collinearity (Aiken and West, 1991). Replicating the ANOVA model described above, Professional condition was a significant predictor of proportion of personal objects, $t(92) = 9.509$, $p < .001$, with higher proportion of personal objects associated with the target described as 'not professional' (Standardized Beta = -.693). Time lived in the U.S. also was a significant predictor of proportion of personal objects, $t(92) = 2.27$, $p = .03$, with a higher proportion of personal objects across conditions associated with greater time participants had lived in the U.S. (Standardized $\beta = -.165$). In Step 2, the interaction was significant, $t(91) = 2.58$, $p = .012$. This interaction, shown in Figure 2, indicates

that minimizing personal objects differentiates someone who is professional from someone who is not professional, and this pattern is particularly strong the longer one has lived in the U.S.[1] Together the regression model suggests that among the mental models of professionalism, minimizing personal references is a learned characteristic of American culture rather than a universal feature of what it means to be professional.

Insert Figure 2 About Here

Discussion

The results of Study 1 support our hypotheses that minimization of personal references at work is part of the professional role schema, and that this may be a feature of America professionalism in particular. The paradigm used in this study provided participants an opportunity to convey different information about their professional role schema, for example, whether minimizing clutter is part of the schema or, as our theoretical analysis suggests, minimizing a specific type of information (i.e., personal) is part of the schema. Moreover, the design allowed us to examine whether this professional role schema differs as a function of participant's gender or the gender of the target employee. There were no reliable differences between our female and male participants, and the results show more subtle differences regarding the target's gender than might be expected.

One modest gender effect was that more personal objects were associated with female targets overall, regardless of their professional reputation. However, there were no differences in the professional standards for men and women; the professional role schema appears to entail the same mean level of minimization whether the person being described was a professional male or

professional female. Despite these similar standards, further analysis shows there is greater consensus about the appropriate level of minimization (scores are more tightly clustered around the mean) for professional women than for all other targets. This effect may be an example of a more general phenomenon in which range of acceptable behaviors in organizations is often broader for men than for women (Rudman and Glick, 1999). High status groups are thought to be given more leeway in breaking or bending rules, laws, or norms (Goffman, 1959; Rudman and Glick, 1999). In many organizations, men tend to have more power and status than women, which provides them with greater latitude in bending cultural norms. By this logic, the gendered legacy of the professional role schema is evident in the different amounts of leeway professional men and professional women have in displaying their professional image, with men having a greater breadth of "acceptable" symbols within the realm of professional image compared to women. Although only a post-hoc interpretation, this finding may explain a restricted normative bandwidth for professional women compared to professional men. Finally, our results show that associating the meaning of being professional with minimization of personal references is tied to the amount of experience one has had living in the U.S., suggesting this element of the professional role schema cannot be assumed to be culturally universal and may rather be a defining characteristic of American professionalism.

To the extent that this minimization of personal references is an important part of what it means to be professional, there should be substantive consequences for deviating from this schema. One limitation of the present study is that it addresses the content of the professional role schema, but does not directly assess the consequences and organizational implications of this schema. As Walsh (1995) argued in a critique of schema literature, understanding a schema's content at the expense of its consequences does not take full advantage of its potential

theoretical value. In the next study, we used a field experiment with industry recruiters to examine the consequences for a job candidates' success in the recruitment process as a function of abiding by or deviating from this professional role schema.

Study 2: Consequences of Abiding by or Violating the Professional Role Schema

During the recruitment process, job candidates carefully construct the impression they would like to create with the organization to increase their chances of securing a job (Rosenfeld, Giacolone, and Riordan, 2002), and recruiters have well-developed schemas for evaluating identity claims made by the job candidates. In Study 2, we conducted a field experiment in which we asked MBA recruiters from American companies representing a diverse set of industries to evaluate one of four job candidate packages. These four versions were created by crossing the candidate's nationality (American versus Brazilian[2]) with two subtle differences that appeared in the candidate's resume (include personal references to family and hobbies or not) and in an accompanying description of how they would build rapport with a client (through reference to family, friends, and hobbies to build rapport or not). We did not examine the effects of making too many personal references in the job interview setting itself—a highly scripted context with legal restrictions on what can and cannot be asked. Instead, we developed an experimental paradigm in which recruiters were provided materials about job candidates indicating their likely behavior in client meeting situations. In these materials, job candidates would describe their strategy for building rapport with a potential client. In these descriptions there were two minor but distinctly different strategies employed: one in which the candidate indicated they would use personal references to build rapport (e.g., "What a beautiful family you have! How old are your kids?"), and another in which the candidate would use a more impersonal reference (e.g., "What

a great office! How long have you been in this location?”). These descriptions were embedded in a larger essay along with a resume for recruiters to evaluate. If minimizing personal references at work is a *consequential* meaning of the professional role schema in contemporary organizations, then we should see its effects, even for such minor schema violations, in recruiters’ evaluations of job candidates and whether they would be invited for a second interview.

> H4a: Recruiters will have more positive evaluations of a candidate’s job application materials that minimize references to personal life compared to one that does not include such references.
>
> H4b: Recruiters will be more likely to invite a candidate back for a second interview if the candidate’s job application materials minimize references to personal life issues compared to one that does not include such references.

The results of study 1 suggest this feature of the professional role schema may be tied to American culture in particular and not necessarily shared across other cultural groups. This raises questions about the implications for a job market with a culturally diverse candidate pool. Despite the cultural specificity of this schema, people tend to perceive their beliefs as reflections of general truths about what is good and moral (Schein, 1992; Sperber, 1996; Ross and Ward, 1997). Thus, people may not be aware of how much their culturally grounded perspectives effects their beliefs and evaluations of others’ behaviors. However, people are indeed cognizant of group membership and tend to evaluate others differently as a function of others’ membership in an in-group versus an out-group (Tajfel, 1978). To examine these issues, we crossed the personal references condition with the cultural group membership of the candidate (American or

Brazilian). This design provided an opportunity to assess whether this role schema would be applied differently to an American candidate versus an equally qualified foreign national candidate.

Specific hypotheses regarding the evaluations of these candidates across conditions were derived from social identity theory, which has a rich empirical literature showing how group members evaluate in-group and out-group members (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Social identity theory (SIT) posits that people evaluate in-group members more favorably than out-group members, and this derives from a motivation to enhance the status of the in-group and hence one's individual status and self-esteem (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Hogg, Terry, and White, 1995). Elaborations and extensions of SIT, however, describe more complex ways in which in-group and out-group members will be evaluated differently. One extension shows that evaluations of in-group members can be markedly low when they behave in a manner that threatens the positive identity of the group. The motivation underlying this "black sheep effect" (Marques and Yzerbyt, 1988; Marques, Yzerbyt, and Leyens, 1988) is that the in-group member's behavior has more relevance and influence on the evaluator's identity by virtue of their shared group membership compared with the behavior of an out-group member. Thus, when a particular in-group member's behavior does not exemplify norms of the in-group, they are derogated more than an out-group member who behaves similarly. Under certain conditions, this can result in an in-group member being more negatively evaluated than an out-group member. According to research on the black sheep effect, the punishment of in-group members who violate expectations and the rewarding of in-group members who follow expectations reflect a motivation to maintain a positive group-based self-identity. This pronounced difference in

evaluations of such in-group members often results in what has been referred to as 'in-group polarization.'

Applying this logic to the present study suggests that American recruiters will have more negative evaluations of American candidates who include even minor personal references in their resume and client rapport building strategies compared to American candidates who do not make such personal references. Moreover, it suggests that American candidates who exemplify this schema-inconsistent style will be more negatively evaluated relative to an out-group candidate (i.e., Brazilian) who shows an identical breech from the schema. Together this suggests that American recruiters will evaluate American role-abiders more favorably than Brazilian role-abiders, because the former provides an opportunity for the evaluator to enhance his or her American identity. However, when the American in-group member violates the group role schema, the in-group member will be evaluated more harshly compared to a violating Brazilian out-group member. Punishing the in-group role schema violator protects the identity of the group by distancing the in-group from negatively deviant behavior. American recruiters punish the American norm-violator because their violation implicates their own identity, but when the Brazilian violates the same norm, it is less consequential for the recruiter's identity. Based on this reasoning, we made the following hypothesis:

> H5: Recruiters' tendency to negatively evaluate candidates who do not exhibit schema-consistent behaviors of minimizing personal references will be more extreme for schema-inconsistent Americans than schema-inconsistent Brazilians.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of business school recruiters from American corporations. We placed an advertisement in the online newsletter of a midwestern business school's career development office. We requested recruiters complete an online version of the survey package. Recruiters who did not initially respond to the online survey were later mailed a hard copy of the survey package. In return for participating, two respondents were given a $100 gift certificate. The cover letter inviting recruiters to participate explained that the study was being conducted to learn more about how to improve recruiters' abilities to evaluate job candidates' performance. Sixty-two recruiters of the 412 receiving the newsletter participated in this field experiment (yielding a response rate of 15%).[3]

The participant recruiters were 51% women, 84% Caucasian/European-American with a mean age of 32 years and a mean recruiting experience of 5.4 years. The recruiters worked for American companies representing a variety of industries: 37% financial, 18% consumer goods, 8% automotive, 7% consulting, with retail, technology, manufacturing, marketing, healthcare, entertainment, and government representing less than 5% of the sample. Participants also represented a range of functions within their industries: 47% human resources, 19% marketing, 10% finance, with development, relationship manager, client services, investment, strategy, and other each comprising less than 5% of the sample.

Design and Procedures

In the cover letter, the study was described as an effort to learn more about the process of evaluating job candidates and specifically to learn more about a novel recruitment technique.

This technique involved having candidates provide recruiters with a description, supposedly written just prior to the interview, of what they would say in an initial meeting with a potential client to build rapport. The idea behind this process was that it would provide recruiters with additional information to use in their recruitment decisions. Participants were asked to read over the materials about an MBA student and then complete an evaluation survey about the student. The materials include a resume and the description of the hypothetical client meeting.

The study used a 2 (Nationality: American vs. Brazilian) X 2 (Minimization of Personal References: yes vs. no) between-subjects design. We manipulated Nationality by varying content in the candidate's resumes, for example, name (Michael Randall vs. Miguel Chavez), undergraduate university (University of Illinois vs. Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Sao Paolo) and location of their work experience (U.S. vs. Brazil). Both candidates were described as current MBA students.

Adherence to the professional role schema was manipulated in two ways. First, we varied the description provided under the "additional" subheading in the résumés. In the minimization condition, this section listed fluency in two foreign languages and membership in a professional association. In the non-minimization condition, two additional lines were added: 'organized an intergenerational reunion for 100 family members' and 'classic movie aficionado." Second, the client meeting narrative contained two remarks that either referenced the personal sphere of life (For example, in commenting on a book in the client's bookshelf: *"My best friend recommended Senge to me first, and then I read him in graduate school as well. My best friend gave me a signed copy of his book for my birthday this year – we often exchange books on special occasions."; In commenting on the client's desk: "I might comment on family photos, 'What a lovely family you have! How old are your kids?' and then offer some information about my*

fiancé and how I proposed to her, family members who have kids the same age, and perhaps my hobbies, such as watching classic movies."), or did not reference personal matters (*"I read Senge's work in graduate school. What do you think of his work?"; "I might say, 'What a great office! How long have you been in this location?' If the office had a window, I might comment on the view."*) These two sentences (Minimization of Personal References: yes, no) were embedded in a one-page narrative that was otherwise identical.

After reading the materials, recruiters were asked to rate candidates on dimensions of style and skill. Specifically, we asked the recruiters to evaluate candidates along four dimensions: (1) how effective the candidate's personal style would be with the client (1 = highly ineffective, 6 = highly effective), (2) how much experience they believed the candidate had (1 = no previous experience, 4 = expert-level experience), (3) how qualified the candidate was for a client contact situation (1 = not at all qualified, 5 = highly qualified), and (4) how intelligent they thought the candidate was (1 = average intelligence, 3 = highly intelligent). These items were combined to create a composite evaluation index (Cronbach's α = .83). Recruiters also were asked to indicate how strongly they would recommend the candidate for a second interview (1 = very strongly recommend against second interview, 6 = very strongly recommend for second interview).

Finally, we included items designed to assess the perceptions of the candidates' general aptitude related to the manipulation and attempts to standardize the other characteristics of the candidate's package. These items included (1) rating the candidate's written communication skills (1 = poor, 6 = highly effective) and (2) rating the candidate's interpersonal skills (1 = poor, 6 = outstanding).

Results

To test that the candidate profiles were successfully standardized in general aptitude (i.e., written communication and interpersonal skills) across the candidate profiles and varied only with respect to Nationality and 'personal' versus 'not personal' style, we conducted a between-subjects 2 (Minimization of Personal References: yes, no) X 2 (Nationality: American, Brazilian) ANOVA on evaluations of candidates' communication skills. The ANOVA showed no reliable differences between conditions (all p's > .20). Similarly, a 2 (Minimization of Personal References: yes, no) X 2 (Nationality: American, Brazilian) ANOVA conducted on evaluations of candidates' interpersonal skills showed no reliable differences between conditions (all p's > .11). These results suggest the candidate profiles were successfully standardized across conditions. We found no significant effects associated with recruiter's gender in any analysis.

To test for the effects of style and Nationality on recruiters' evaluations of the candidates, a 2 (Minimization of personal references: yes, no) X 2 (Nationality: American, Brazilian) ANOVA was performed on the evaluation index. The ANOVA showed a significant interaction, $F(1,58) = 8.85$, $p < .01$. As predicted (H4a), American candidates who made personal references were significantly more negatively evaluated ($M = 2.55$, $SD = .44$) compared to those who did not ($M = 3.12$, $SD = .57$), $t(57) = 3.05$, $p < .01$. There were no significant differences for Brazilian candidates who did or did not minimize personal references ($M = 2.80$, $SD = .13$, $M = 2.60$, $SD = .12$, respectively), $p < .25$. Moreover, Americans who did not make a personal reference were significantly more positively evaluated compared to the three other candidates, $t(57) = 3.10$, $p < .01$. Americans who made personal references were evaluated as negatively (but not more negatively) than either of the two Brazilian candidates (both p's > .25). There were no

significant main effects of Minimization of personal references or Nationality. These results provide support for H4a and H4b but not H5.

Next, a 2 (Minimization of personal references: yes, no) X 2 (Nationality: American, Brazilian) ANOVA on recommendation for a second interview showed a significant interaction between style and Nationality, $F(1,57) = 4.29$, $p < .05$. As predicted (H4b), Americans who made reference to personal topics were significantly less likely to receive an invitation for a second interview ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.10$) compared to those who did not ($M = 4.4$, $SD = .63$), $t(57) = 2.22$, $p < .04$. Brazilians' chances for a second interview did not differ as a function of their tendency to make or not make personal references ($M = 3.93$, $SD = .85$, $M = 3.73$, $SD = .53$, respectively), $F < 1$. As shown in Figure 3, Americans who did not make a personal reference were significantly more likely to receive a second interview compared to the three other candidates, $t(57) = 2.45$, $p < .02$, and Americans who did make personal references were as unlikely to get that opportunity (but not *more* unlikely) than were either of the two Brazilian candidates (both t's < 1). These results provide further support for H4a and H4b.

Insert Figure 3 About Here

Discussion

These results provide evidence across different evaluation measures that using personal topics to build rapport and including even minor personal information in one's job application materials has a negative influence on one's image in the eyes of recruiters for American companies and thus success in the recruitment process. This effect emerged only for American candidates. Evaluations of Brazilian candidates were unaffected by how much or little they

touched on personal topics. However, recruiters penalized Americans who did not conform to the role schema. Thus, there were no main effects of Nationality; the in-group advantage associated with being American held only when the American adhered to the professional role schema as one who does not blur the work/personal divide.

We did not find support for the 'black sheep' effect whereby in-group members are castigated more than out-group members for violating schemas. There was no significant difference between the American who did not minimize personal references and either of the Brazilian candidates. Nonetheless, these results do provide evidence of the negative consequences for American candidates who deviate from the professional role schema. Moreover, our results replicate a pattern reported by MBA outplacement offices where foreign national students have less success in the recruitment process than their American counterparts. The results of this study suggest, however, that the advantage emerges only when the American adheres to particular standards of professionalism.

General Discussion

Two studies investigated the notion that a defining characteristic of the professional role schema is minimizing personal references, and that American organizations tend to favor candidates who exemplify this schema. This schema appears to be more characteristic of and applied most strictly to Americans. The longer one has lived in the U.S., the more one uses this standard of restricting personal symbols to differentiate workers who are considered professional compared to those who are not. Although our study did not include a comprehensive survey of world cultures, the diverse background of our participants and the increasing strength of our effects among participants with greater exposure to U.S. culture shows minimization of personal references at work may not be a universal feature of what it means to be professional. Although

other cultures may have a schema for professionalism, our results suggest minimizing personal references may not be as prominent a feature as it is in the U.S.

More broadly, our findings build upon and extend prior research showing that American relational work patterns are more culturally specific than universal (Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars, 1993; Lipset, 1996; Baker, 2004; Sanchez-Burks, 2004). This research, which spans sociology, cultural psychology, and organizational studies, has bolstered Weber's (1904, 1947) argument concerning the lasting influence of prior historical and cultural conditions on contemporary American organizations and relationships in them. The present research elaborates on this work to demonstrate how the core assumptions about what it means to be a good, valued worker across industries entails restricting attributes that reveal one's personal life outside work. Role schemas, like other organizational structures, appear to be affected by conditions at the time of their founding. Though we did not directly assess the process implied – U.S. industrialization shaping the content of the professional role schema – this research shares similarities with researchers who have examined the effects of founding conditions on organizational structures like job classification systems (DiPrete, 1989) and the managerial-administrative intensity, or pervasiveness of administrative roles and personnel (Baron, Hannan, and Burton, 1999). These studies imply that cultural norms and beliefs at the time of the founding of jobs have lasting effects on the organizational structures.

This paper also provides insight into one way in which history and culture influence impression-management dynamics in organizations from the perspective of observers and evaluators. This complements recent efforts focused on how people actively construct and grant identities in organizations (Bartel and Dutton, 2001) by examining some of the tacit cultural biases that affect perceptions of identity work. By shifting our analysis to the role schema rather

than impression-management tactics *per se*, we gain insight into how macro-level concepts, such as culture and history, can shape people's assumptions about their very impression-management goals.

The Gendered Nature of Professionalism

The gendered nature of professional role schemas also emerged in our results. Study 1 found that women are expected to make fewer personal references at work compared to men, regardless of whether they have a professional reputation, and that this expectation does not appear to differ for men versus women managers. This finding is consistent with prior impression management and gender research that has shown that women deflect attention from their gender identity more than men at work. To the extent that personal representations are more associated with women than men, it may be that people expect that females' gender identity is something to be attenuated. However, when women are well represented in the upper echelons of organizations, women may feel less constrained in expressing their gender identity (Ely, 1994, 1995; Martin, Knopoff and Beckman, 1998). A topic for future research would be to explore how the identity work of a professional is manifested across such varied organizational contexts (Roberts, forthcoming). Whereas the present research focused on a higher order role schema that spanned organizational and industry boundaries, future research could examine the ways it is enacted in specific social settings.

Our findings suggest a second, more nuanced way that gender interacts with the professional role schema. In people's mental models, women appear to have narrower leeway in making professional identity claims compared to men, as indicated by the restricted variance in personal items associated with professional women. Although there were no mean differences between professional men and women, which would suggest a different standard for each

gender, there was tighter consensus on the "right" number of personal objects for professional women than for professional men. This suggests that men have comparably more freedom in conveying an appropriate image compared to women. The present findings show the nuanced and complex ways these patterns are represented in the mental models used to interpret and evaluate others.

Finally, researchers have long noted that gender is socially constructed and reconstructed over time in organizations (Kanter, 1977; Acker, 1990; Ely, 1995). Our findings provide some insight into the implicit standards that guide how men and women construct gender in contemporary organizations. The different standards for men and women overall uncover some of the implicit standards that guide differential identity work of men and women. These findings, which help to uncover the general, implicit standards that Americans hold about what it means to convey professionalism, can help explain *why* women experience their work and gender roles as contradictory (Kanter, 1977; Sheppard, 1992), and *why* women tend to have more developed schemata regarding such impression-management strategies as dress (for a review, see Rafaeli et al., 1997) and personal grooming (Dellinger and Williams, 1997). Because women are held to more restrictive standards to convey professionalism and their gender identity appears to be somewhat professional-role incongruent, women need more sophisticated ways of approaching identity work than men.

Group Biases and the Black Sheep Effect

The consequences of acting inconsistently with the professional role schema can be costly, as illustrated by our results in Study 2. Even minor deviations from the imperative to avoid raising personal issues reduce one's image in the eyes of corporate recruiters. Surprisingly, the effect of abiding by or violating this imperative did not appear for foreign national job

candidates (i.e., Brazilians). Moreover, the interaction of nationality and adherence to the role schema suggests that contrary to a social identity theory perspective, there was no overall in-group bias in favor of American candidates—only a particular kind of American, namely, one who "acted professional" and did not reference personal matters. Although a corollary of social identity theory, the black sheep effect, suggests that Americans who violate group norms would be more negatively evaluated than Brazilians who behave similarly, we did not find support for this proposition.

However, the overall, though non-significant, pattern of the data does suggest that in-group members (Americans) were evaluated more extremely than out-group members (Brazilians), which is consistent with the black sheep effect and in-group polarization more generally. Future research may be able to ascertain the conditions under which schema-violating Americans are penalized significantly more than their international counterparts. The present research demonstrates only one dimension of in-group polarization – the American role-consistent candidate – was rewarded significantly more compared to his Brazilian minimizing counterpart. Moreover, our results suggest that as used by American recruiters, the professional role schema is differentially applied to cultural in-group and out-group candidates. The basis for this difference would be an important topic for future research to investigate.

Organizations and the Reproduction of the Professional Schema

In the eyes of recruiters for American organizations, a candidate whose strategy for building rapport with a client include references such as family were viewed unfavorably, with the implication that the organization would not select these candidates. Thus, the findings provide insight into a mechanism for how this particular cultural schema, and likely others, are reproduced and institutionalized on a societal level. It suggests that organizations are more likely

to select, and perhaps retain, and promote people who conform to this role schema, as they do for other cultural imperatives (Schein, 1992). In this way, our Study 2 findings provide a perspective often overlooked in cultural research: the role of institutions in sustaining and enforcing cultural patterns of thought and action.

Recruiters' failure to reward foreign nationals for schema-consistent behavior is noteworthy. The second study can be used to understand how cross-cultural interactions may be fraught with misunderstood impression-management cues. The standard used by Americans does not appear to be shared widely by those not born and raised in the U.S. However, even when congruent with the American role schema, internationals remain disadvantaged by their out-group status. The implication is that adapting to the norms and standards of the host culture may not be enough to offset in-group bias. Although this tentative conclusion is certainly gloomy, research that takes a structural approach to recruitment and hiring processes may lead toward solutions for mitigating in-group bias. Seidel, Polzer, and Stewart (2000), for example, found that when racial minority job candidates had a social tie to an organization, racial differences in negotiated salary outcomes disappeared. However, racial minorities were less likely than whites to have those organizational ties. In cross-cultural work contexts, perhaps it will take attention to social, macro-level structures to lessen the impact of implicit cultural biases.

A related issue raised by the findings in our second study focuses on the ultimate diagnostic value of the cues that implicitly influence evaluations of job candidates. Blurring a work/personal boundary is detrimental to one's success in the recruitment process, but is it predictive of success and performance on the job? Although this remains an important topic for future research, prior research outside the recruitment process has indeed shown that successfully conveying particular identities (e.g., professional) in the daily life of work elicits desired

responses from others (Leary and Kowalski, 1990; Bartel and Dutton, 2001). Thus, to the extent that an employee's image continues to deviate from the implicit standards of professionalism, such an employee may indeed be less effective on the job on a day-to-day basis, as daily identity work proceeds.

In closing, one of the contributions of this research is to provide insight into how culturally situated mental models of professionalism can influence an individual's identity work in organizations. Our results complement the rich literature on how people actively manage their identities (Snow and Anderson, 1987; Ibarra, 1999; Creed and Scully, 2000; Ashforth, Kreiner, and Fugate, 2000; Roberts, forthcoming) by providing a novel perspective on the cultural role schemas used to interpret others' identity work. One goal of the present research is to generate further interest into understanding how social-historical and cultural contexts shape the tacit understanding that underlies the process of perceiving, conveying, and conferring identities in organizations. At least within American organizations, the identity of a professional appears to require one to avoid blurring the divide between work and social life.

Figure 1

Proportion of personal objects used to reconstruct an employee's office as a function of target's gender and reputation as a professional. Error bars represent one between-subjects standard error.

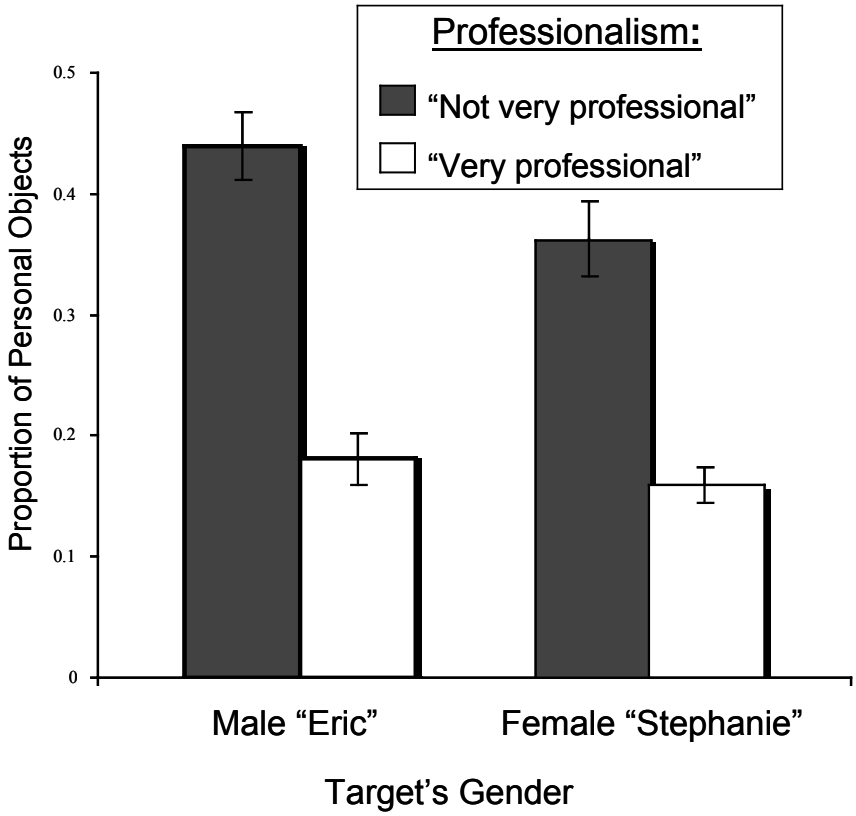


Figure 2

Proportion of personal objects used to reconstruct an employee's office as a function of years participants lived in the U.S. and target's reputation as a professional.

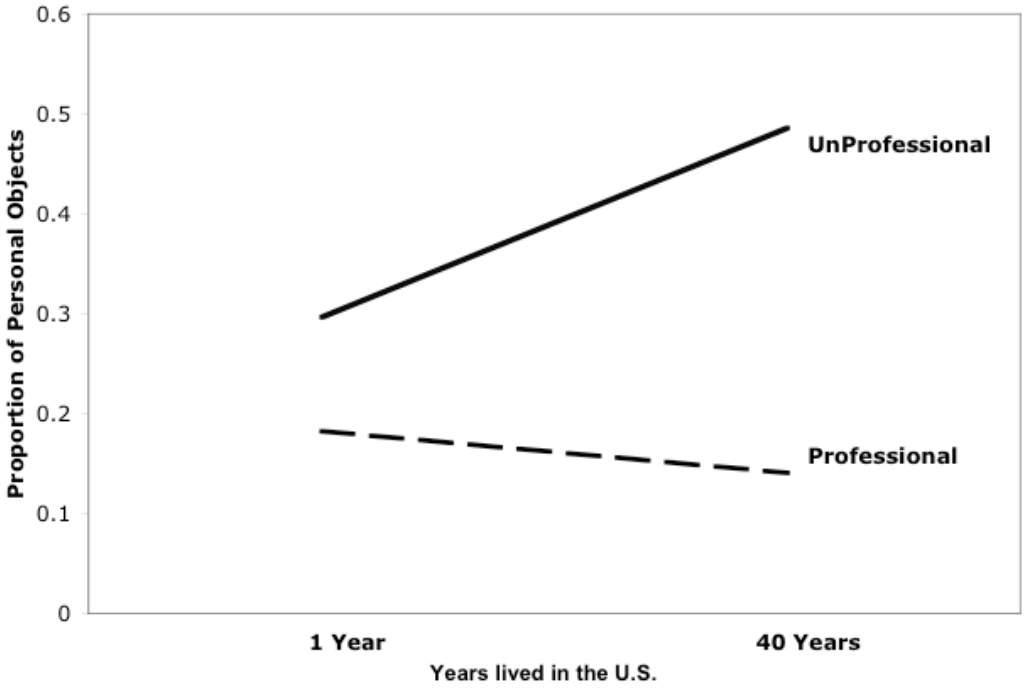
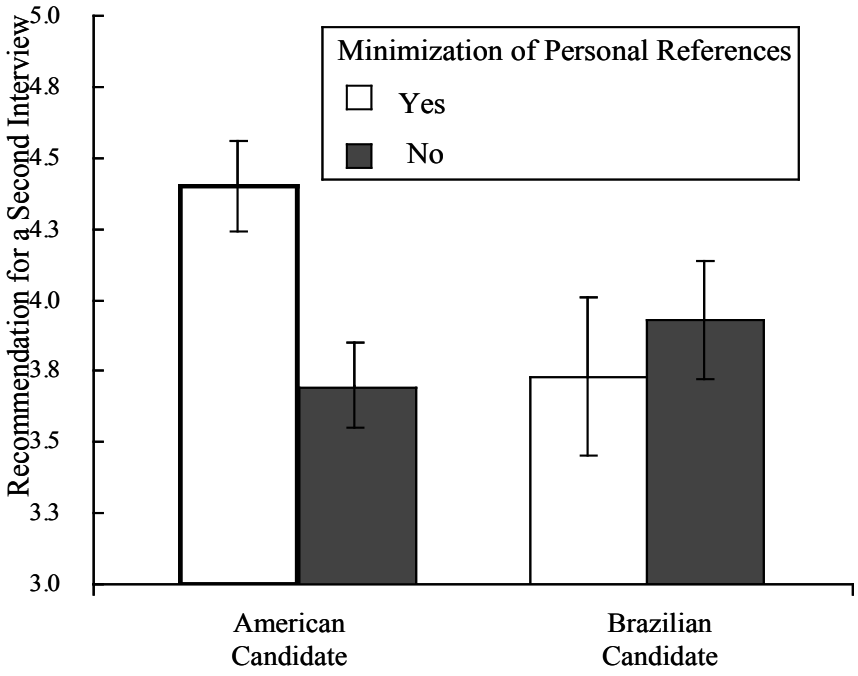


Figure 3

Recruiter's recommendation for a second interview as a function of whether the candidate minimized personal references and nationality. Error bars represent one between-subjects standard error.



Endnotes

[1]Given the restricted age range of the evening MBA participants (more than 84% of participants were between ages 25 and 35), this effect cannot easily be attributed to age of the participants. Moreover, separate regression models controlling for age show no effect for age ($p > .05$) or eliminated the interaction between condition and time spent in the U.S.

[2] Our goal was to select a foreign nationality that would appear realistic to our recruiter participants given the demographics of the MBA student population. Brazilians are a common group among the foreign national student population from which the recruiters interview.

[3]A comparison of the industry demographics available for respondents and non-respondents suggests there was no sampling bias among industries.

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