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Cultural Impressions of Professionalism

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Abstract

Two studies with working managers and corporate recruiters examined evidence that impressions of professionalism are influenced by cues of whether one appropriately minimizes personal referents at work, particularly within certain industrialized cultures. Study 1 showed that proportion of office objects symbolic of one's personal life differentiated the mental image of a professional versus unprofessional worker. This effect was moderated by experience living in the U.S., suggesting this standard for professionalism may be culturally bounded. Study 2 showed that for American but not foreign job candidates, adherence to this minimization ideology led to more favorable recruiting evaluations. Implications for cultural imprints on organizational dynamics are discussed.

Cultural Impressions of Professionalism

Organizational scholars have long been interested in how people establish and convey professional status (e.g., Carr-Saunders & Wilson, 1933; Ibarra, 1999; Roberts, 2005; Vollmer and Mills, 1966). In organizations, professionalism is invoked both to describe those who embody valued characteristics and to censure norm violators. Those receiving advice to "be professional" are expected to recognize their departure from protocol and adjust accordingly. Conversely, those who exemplify one's image of professionalism are granted a positive, elevated status. As described in a recent review by Roberts (2005), having a professional reputation in an organization is linked to social approval, power, subjective well-being, and career success. As such, impressions of professionalism represent an important component of a person's reputation with consequences for their career.

What constitutes professionalism? Prior research has focused on how certain occupations have been transformed into professions (Abbott, 1998; Goode, 1957; Larson, 1977; Vollmer & Mills, 1966). Other literature has focused on how individuals come to identify as members of a profession, that is, as a professional (e.g., Hall, 1968), and how this identification influences outcomes including stress, turnover, and self-directed work practices (e.g., Bartol, 1979; Haga, Graen, & Dansereau, 1974).

With the historic emphasis on professionals as members of certain formal occupations, professionalism could be inferred via a target's membership in a relevant organization. As occupations considered "professional" proliferated, however, the term professionalism has diffused through organizations and occupations to become part of the general vernacular used to describe everyday organizational behavior. Indeed, recent studies show that "professionalism" remains a desired identity and a meaningful attribute inferred about others across a wide variety

of occupations, including high-technology workers (Elsbach, 2004), nurses (Pratt & Rafaeli, 1997), and administrative assistants (Rafaeli, Dutton, Harquail, & Mackie-Lewis, 1997). Indeed, people use impression management tactics in order to be viewed as congruent with prevailing notions of professionalism in one's context (e.g., Ibarra, 1999; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Roberts, 2005).

Although the term 'professional' is invoked as if it were clear, the criteria contained within the mental schema of professionalism are actually based on a variety of tacit, culturally grounded assumptions about what is appropriate and inappropriate at work (see Roberts, 2005 for an excellent review of this literature). The schema for professionalism can include, among other criteria, unspoken imperatives about controlling emotional expressions (Hochschild, 1979, 1993; Morris & Keltner, 2000), wearing certain attire (Pratt & Rafaeli, 1997; Rafaeli et al., 1997), claiming certain social identities (Roberts, 2005), and having a particular workspace arrangement (Elsbach, 2004). Together, this research suggests that the schema for professionalism is likely multifaceted with certain criteria that remain unique to specific societal cultures, genders, and organizational contexts (c.f. Ashford, Rothbard, Piderit, & Dutton, 1998; Ibarra, 1999; Kerr, Von Glinow, & Schriesheim, 1977; Rafaeli & Sutton 1991). The present research was designed to address the culturally grounded nature of assumptions about professionalism. Specifically, we examine cultural variation in the mental schema people hold of someone who is, or is not, viewed as a professional and how even subtle deviations from culturally accepted standards of professionalism can affect career opportunities. Within the multifaceted schema of professionalism, we focus on one particular cue theorized to be central to the image of professionalism: the degree to which an individual minimizes references to personal life while at work.

Literatures in cultural psychology, sociology, and organization studies, together, suggest the importance of work/non-work boundary to the mental image of professionalism, particularly in American contexts. Cultural psychological analyses of American workways, and in particular the influence of Protestant relational ideology (PRI) on beliefs about proper relational work styles, suggest that in certain societies minimization of personal referents at work is central to a professionalism schema (for a recent review see Sanchez-Burks, 2005). PRI theory describes a cultural belief system in which personal and social-emotional concerns are assumed to be relatively inappropriate and therefore ought to be restricted within work contexts compared to non-work contexts. As we describe in this paper, an implication of PRI theory for notions of professionalism is that to be considered professional is to embody this larger cultural ideology concerning the minimization of personal referents while at work.

Sociologists also have argued that although home and work overlapped in a farm and agricultural economy, with industrialization, work came to be viewed as a public activity requiring a public presentation of a carefully constructed self (e.g., Nippert-Eng, 1996). Over time the definition of a good worker became one who could perform duties without regard to family ties and free from the influence of responsibilities that might hinder work performance (Acker, 1990; Kanter, 1977). As increasing numbers of occupations claimed professional status as a way of increasing their prestige, visibility, and perceived expertise (Abbott, 1988), it has been argued that presenting oneself as consistent with this norm became the mark of a "professional" worker (Kanter, 1977). Minimizing personal references at work is a key way to demonstrate one's adherence to this norm.

Recent work in the domain of "boundary theory" similarly argues that the transition between work and non-work work is a relevant, in fact central, concern for American employees

(Ashforth, Kreiner, and Fugate, 2000), and that organizational policies that affect how employees manage these transitions is consequential for their job satisfaction and commitment to the organization (e.g., Rothbard, Philips, & Dumas, 2005). Together these different literatures converge on a central theme about how personal referents in the workplace serve as a prominent and relevant cue used to form impressions of others' professionalism in the workplace.

Building on these literatures, and inspired by recent research on impression formation in natural contexts (e.g., Elsbach, 2004; Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002), the present research complements most impression management research by focusing not on what an individual does to create a certain image, but rather on the schema others use as a template for inferring that individual's professionalism. Specifically, we propose that the minimization of personal references at work is a cue used to evaluate people's professionalism that is relevant across diverse industries.

We also propose that the meaningfulness of this cue as an indicator of professionalism varies across societal cultures and may contribute to a particularly American standard of professionalism. We base this proposition of cultural specificity on prior observations that suggest cultural groups often show deep-seated differences in their assumptions concerning proper workplace behavior, assumptions often taken for granted as reflecting the nature of business rather than as culturally bounded beliefs (e.g., Earley, 2002; Gelfand & Dyer, 2002; Triandis, Dunnette, & Hough, 1994). Moreover, a general aversion for blurring the work/personal boundary in the context of work has been shown in prior research to be more reflective of American business practices than of those found in many other industrialized societies, suggesting this criterion of professionalism may be characteristic of American or Western European contexts rather than a universal feature of business culture (Sanchez-Burks,

2005). Thus, we also examine evidence for whether this minimization criterion for professionalism is more characteristic of mainstream American managers relative to managers from other societies.

Role of Social Inferences in Organizations

A rich literature has shown that in organizations, as elsewhere in life, people consciously and unconsciously work to avoid negative stereotypes and images and to act congruently with desired ones in an effort to shape the impressions others have of them (for excellent reviews see Leary & Kowalski, 1990 and Roberts, 2005). The actions and strategies people use to manage impressions are tightly interwoven with their assumptions about the standards others use to confer or deny particular identities. For example, Rafaeli, Pratt, and their colleagues (Pratt & Rafaeli, 1997; Rafaeli et al., 1997) demonstrated that individuals choose their attire based on their assumptions of how various types of clothing conform to organizationally shared images of a professional. Similarly, research by Ashford, Dutton, and their colleagues (Ashford et al, 1998; Dutton, Ashford, Lawrence, & Miner-Rubino, 2002) shows how women's decisions to advocate for a potentially contentious issue in their organizations is moderated by the standards they believe others would use to form impressions of them. Among their sample of managers, if selling an issue was believed to be part of a negative stereotype held by others in their organization, women were less likely to advocate for the issue so as to avoid damage to their personal reputations, even if they believed strongly in the issue. Thus, assumptions about standards and cues others use to form impressions can prompt people to both avoid certain actions and to engage in others as they strive to craft and maintain desired impressions of themselves in the organization.

Social Inferences and Schemas: The Psychology of Impressions

The cues people consider indicative of others' level of professionalism can be understood in reference to the contents of their mental image or schema of professionalism. Specifically, professionalism schemas include knowledge about the attributes of a prototypical person who is professional. As with other mental knowledge structures, schemas help people organize, interpret, and evaluate their social environment by providing heuristics about the qualities and behaviors they can expect from different types of people (e.g., a "free rider" or "entrepreneur"). As shown in prior social cognition studies, impressions about others are specifically formed based on the congruence between the perceived attributes of the person being evaluated and the evaluator's mental image or schema of a particular trait or type of person (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Gilbert, 1998).

The development of the content and structure of mental schemas occurs through experience and socialization in particular social and cultural contexts (Budhwar & Sparrow, 2002; Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Rafaeli & Worline, 2000). Over time, exposure to direct and indirect messages about the cues associated with different social labels contribute to what becomes taken-for-granted knowledge within that cultural context (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Thus, differences in the shared experiences between people within an occupational role, organization, industry, or even societal culture can create a degree of consensus within groups--and consequently differences between groups--about the attributes of particular social images. For example, Choi (1997) found that American's schema of the corporate executive is positively associated with height, whereas the reverse pattern is more common within Korea. Thus, height is used in both cultures as a cue to infer importance within an organization but is related to opposing types of impressions within their respective cultures; the taller of two people is predicted to be of higher status within the U.S. but not within Korea. Through this process of

shared experiences within and between groups, whether at the level of one's organization or society, schemas operate as a mechanism through which culture influences perceptions (Morris & Young 2005; Earley & Mosakowski, 2002).

Culture and Schemas of Professionalism

Shared experiences within cultural societies result in a rich diversity in beliefs about what is true, good, and efficient within the domain of work (Earley, 1997; Gelfand & Brett, 2004; Triandis, Dunnette, & Hough, 1984). One theme that emerges from prior cross-cultural research on organizational behavior is that there is systematic cultural variation in beliefs about the boundaries between work and personal domains. This boundary refers to the extent to which aspects of one's life outside work extends into the workplace and vice versa. In societies such as Japan, Germany, Poland, Korea, and Mexico, where research suggests there is a preference for a relatively permeable work/personal boundary, occupational titles are used outside work (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1993); attention to others' personal feelings and emotional states are as high or higher at work as when with friends (Earley, 1997; Sanchez-Burks, Lee, Choi, Nisbett, Zhao, & Koo, 2003); work and personal social networks tend to overlap; employees spend significant amounts of their personal time socializing with coworkers and more generally remain informed about personal lives of their peers, bosses, and subordinates (Kacperczyk, Sanchez-Burks, & Baker, 2005; Kim, 1988; Triandis, Marin, Lisansky, & Bettancourt, 1984; Tsui & Farh, 1997). Perhaps surprisingly, such overlaps between the work and personal domain of life appear quite common across many societies, with one recently documented exception: mainstream American work styles/patterns (Sanchez-Burks, 2005). Reflecting the Protestant relational ideology (PRI), Americans' approach to business relations appears to exemplify a substantially more segmented work/personal boundary where people are

expected to put aside personal matters and focus almost exclusively on work-specific concerns upon entering the office. This ideology emphasizes the importance of minimizing the personal as well as social emotional dimension of workplace interactions. Although this ideology has been found to be pervasive within American culture, research by Rothbard, Philips, and Dumas (2005) demonstrates that in spite of this central tendency there indeed exists substantial individual variation within this society in personal preferences for segmenting versus blurring the work/personal boundary. Consistent with a broader theme of the importance of congruence with cultural mores, their research illustrates the negative individual and organizational consequences that can arise when an ideology of segmentation encounters organizational initiatives that blur the work/personal divide (e.g., on-site child care).

Akin to an institutional imprinting perspective, PRI has been traced empirically to the beliefs and practices of the early founding Protestant communities of American society, who created a relational work style to reflect early Puritan tenets that attention to relational concerns distracted one from performing one's calling in life, that is, daily work (Fischer, 1989; McNeill, 1954; Sanchez-Burks, 2002; Weber, 1947). Although originally tied to explicit religious connotations reflecting proper behavior, PRI's imperatives about restricting relational concerns while working were secularized over time and incorporated into the contemporary work ethos of European American culture as has its cousin the Protestant Work Ethic (Fischer, 1989; Weber, 1947). Though patterns of depersonalizing work also have been associated with the rise of industrialization (e.g., Tonnies, 1887/2002), a period not unique to the U.S., scholars have argued that industrialization spread and institutionalized this preexisting ideology about the work/personal boundary throughout American society to a greater extent than in other societies including Northern Europe (e.g., Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1993; Weber, 1947).

Moreover, implicit cognitive and behavioral measures of PRI show that the use of schemas that reduce the importance of personal and social-emotional concerns at work is more closely linked with experience in American culture than with ethnicity, gender, or religiosity (see Sanchez-Burks, 2005 for a review).

PRI research suggests that the standard of adequately minimizing references to one's personal life while at work may be an important criterion used to judge others' levels of professionalism. Moreover, it suggests that this criterion may be more important for American managers compared to managers from other societies—a question examined in the present research. Although our review of research on PRI and work/non-work segmentation more broadly does not suggest a zero tolerance within the U.S. for cues symbolic of one's personal life at work or that it is completely unimportant in other cultures to maintain some boundary between work and personal, non-work domains, it does, however, suggest that the threshold at which someone is perceived as unprofessional should be relatively lower within the U.S. Thus, we examined in Study 1 evidence for the hypothesis that (a) minimizing references to one's personal life is indeed an attribute of the professionalism schema among contemporary workers, and (b) the use of this criterion to judge others as professional or unprofessional is moderated by experience within American culture such that this criterion is less commonly used among people with less experience in American culture.

Study 1

To examine whether a particular attribute is part of an individual's schema, researchers most commonly have relied on implicit or indirect measures to examine contents of schemas—for example, memory or reaction time responses (Baldwin, 1992; Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Implicit measures in contrast to self-report measures allow for a more direct measure of cognition

uninfluenced by self-assessment and presentation biases (Dunning, Heath, & Suls, 2004; Heine, Lehman, Peng, & Greenholtz, 2002; Morris & Young, 2002). In Study 1 we developed a similar method to measure for specific potential characteristics of professionalism schemas. Our method was inspired by recent studies showing how individuals use cues in the natural environment, such as people's workspaces and bedrooms, to make strong inferences about others' characteristics and personalities (Elsbach, 2004; Gosling et al., 2002). That an individual would base their impressions of others on seemingly mundane objects such as pictures, mementos, and other artifacts is consistent with the anthropological perspective that argues that important cultural meanings are embodied in everyday symbols (Geertz, 1973; Ortner, 1973; Sperber, 1996). As organizational researchers have put it, artifacts represent visible manifestations of underlying values and assumptions (Pratt & Rafaeli, 2005; Schein, 1992).

In study 1, we used a method that is the reverse of prior studies in which people come to conclusions about others based on their physical spaces. In this study, we provided participants with the description of a target employee as professional or unprofessional, a picture of an empty office containing only a desk and empty shelves, and instructions to construct what they imagine this target person's office would look like using self-adhesive stickers with scale-sized images of virtually every type of object one might find in an office. The logic of this design was to provide participants with a method for making schema-based representations of someone who is considered professional versus unprofessional that would allow us to unobtrusively measure how much, if at all, minimizing personal references at work is a marker of someone who is professional. To the extent that minimizing personal references at work is part of the schema for professionalism, then restricting the number of symbolic references to one's personal life (e.g., a

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

> *Hypothesis 1. People's schema of professionalism includes the attribute 'minimizes personal referents' such that a smaller proportion of items associated with an individual's personal life are imagined to appear in the office of someone with a professional reputation as compared to someone with an unprofessional reputation.*

If, however, minimizing personal references at work is a standard of professionalism that is characteristic of American culture in particular than it is among managers across industrialized societies, managers with less exposure to U.S. culture (e.g., recent immigrants or international students who remained in the U.S. after college) should then be less likely to use this cue to differentiate the image of someone who is or is not professional. Thus,

> *Hypothesis 2. The attribute 'minimizes personal referents' in the schema of professionalism is more common within the U.S. such that time living in the U.S. will moderate differences in the proportion of personal items managers will use to construct the office of someone with a professional reputation as compared to someone with an unprofessional reputation.*

In addition to examining the schema's cultural specificity, our experimental design also varied the gender of the office occupant to examine whether this standard is applied differently to men versus women. The notion that standards of professionalism could vary by gender follows from research showing that social practices and organizational structures continue to bear the gendered imprint of their founding conditions (Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Strang & Baron, 1990). That men, relative to women, have traditionally been overrepresented in valued organizational roles would suggest that people might have different mental images of

professionalism for women and men. For example, if individual's schema for professionalism is related to their gender schemas, they may imagine a greater proportion of personal referents in the office of a woman considered unprofessional compared to the office of a man also considered unprofessional. Alternatively, women's participation in the labor force has increased dramatically, and since the 1970s, women have entered historically male occupations and job categories in increasing numbers (Costa, 2000). As a result, schemas of professionalism may no longer be tied to a specific gender. Although such competing perspectives on the possible role gender may have in schemas of professionalism preclude specific *a priori* hypotheses, Study 1 was designed to contribute empirically to this issue.

Method

Participants

Ninety-five full-time 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 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). The ethnic breakdown of the managers was as follows: European-American/Caucasian, 52; Asian/Asian-American, 35; Black/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.

Materials

To create the experimental materials, a group of 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. To obtain

experimental materials of objects symbolic of work or personal domain, digital color images of these items were pre-tested 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).

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 to or less than –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. Twenty-eight objects were eliminated because the images were visually unclear. Examples of work-related objects included stapler, file folder, and calculator; neutral objects included a plant, a landscape painting, and a wall clock; 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. This color image of an office appeared on an 11” x 17” sheet of paper. The image showed a three-wall office containing a desk, empty bookshelves, chair, desktop computer, and telephone.

On the backside of the office image page 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 unprofessional or professional. 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

Participants were asked to complete the exercise on 'workplace characteristics' during their organizational behavior class 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, packages were distributed that contained a print of the office image, the description of the person who occupied that office, and the self-adhesive stickers showing the individual office objects. Participants were asked to read the description of the office occupant and then use the stickers to reconstruct what they believed that person's office looked 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 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 and used the exercise and its results as a basis for lecture.

Dependent Measure

For each participant we counted the total number of objects used to reconstruct the office of the professional and unprofessional target and then calculated the ratio of personal objects to

the total number of objects to create an index that controlled for the overall number of objects used.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Manipulation Check. To confirm that participants understood that they were reconstructing the office of a target with a professional versus unprofessional reputation, a one-way between-subjects ANOVA was conducted on post-experiment ratings of the level of 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.

No differences were found as a function of sex of participant, age of participant, or length of participants' work experience. Thus, these variables were excluded from subsequent analyses.

Does the schema for professionalism include the attribute 'minimizes personal referents'?

Hypothesis 1 predicted that participants would use a greater proportion of personal referents to reconstruct the office of a hypothetical target described as professional compared to one described as unprofessional. A 2 (professional vs. not very professional) X 2 (male vs. female) ANOVA was conducted on the proportion of personal referents used to construct the office of the target. As shown in Figure 1, there was a main effect of target's level of professionalism indicating that, as predicted in hypothesis 1, a higher proportion of personal referents were used for a target described as unprofessional ($M = .40$, $SD = .15$) compared to a target described as professional ($M = .17$, $SD = .07$), $F(1,91) = 88.99$, $p < .001$. Thus, the image

of someone who is professional versus unprofessional reflects the proportion of objects that reference their personal, non-work life.

Does experience in the U.S. moderate the contents of the schema for professionalism?

Hypothesis 2 predicted that the image of professionalism as an individual who minimizes personal references would vary according to the number of years participants had lived in the U.S. Specifically, we expected that the more years a participant had lived in the U.S., the more likely their office reconstructions would differentiate professional versus unprofessional occupants as a function proportion of personal items displayed in the office. To examine this hypothesis, we regressed the proportion of personal referents on the length of time participants had lived in the U.S., professionalism condition, and their interaction. Professional condition was coded as 0 = unprofessional, 1 = professional. In the regression model, 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 results described above, professionalism condition was a significant predictor of proportion of personal referents, $t(92) = 9.509$, $p < .001$, with higher proportion of personal referents associated with the target described as 'unprofessional' (Standardized $\beta = -.693$). Time lived in the U.S. also was a significant predictor of proportion of personal referents, $t(92) = 2.27$, $p = .03$, with a higher proportion of personal referents 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 referents differentiates someone who is unprofessional from someone who is professional, and this pattern is particularly strong the longer one has lived in the U.S. 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. Nonetheless to examine this possibility separate regression models were conducted controlling for age. The regression showed no effect for age ($p > .05$) and did not significantly affect the interaction between condition and time spent in the U.S. Overall, these results suggest that conceptualizing professionalism in terms of minimizing personal referents is a characteristic that comes with experience living in American culture rather than a culturally universal feature of what it means to be professional.

Is the minimization rule applied to men and women differently?

Although no specific hypothesis could be made regarding the direction of gender differences, for exploratory purposes the experimental design varied the gender of the target. There was a main effect of target's gender indicating a smaller proportion of personal referents 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 referents overall. Because the interaction was not significant, these findings suggest this notion is not linked to a gendered schema for professionalism per se, but may be a more broadly held view about women in the workplace.

Discussion

This study examined how people form impressions of professionalism, and tested the proposition that the schema for professionalism includes the attribute of minimizing personal referents at work. The results, based on a sample of working male and female managers, provide evidence that such minimization is indeed part of the professionalism schema. When the data

include an analysis of the level of experience in the U.S., the results further suggest this way of differentiating professional from unprofessional workers is more relevant within the U.S. than abroad. Consistent with Protestant relational ideology theory and prior historical and cross-cultural research, maintaining a segmented boundary between work and personal domains of life is a valued imperative such that to be consistent with the ideology is to be perceived as professional, while deviating from it can earn one the label of unprofessional.

Together, our findings contribute to work on impressions of professionalism and on a cultural psychology perspective of organizational behavior by revealing culturally bound criteria used to form an important and consequential impression of others. These findings complement recent work on the challenges international workers face when trying to translate and convey desired impressions in new cultural contexts (e.g., Early & Ang, 2003; Molinsky, 2005). Our studies provide further insight into how cultural differences in the criteria used to form positive and negative impressions of others can contribute to misunderstandings and potentially missed opportunities for organizations to recruit the best talent.

These results also contribute to emerging research on the role of artifacts in organizations. Prior research has demonstrated that the meaning of artifacts can change over time (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996), and that individuals have different and even conflicting interpretations based on their organizational membership, status, or role (Pratt & Rafaeli, 2005; Rafaeli & Vilnai-Yavetz, 2005). However, much less is known about how experience within particular societal-level cultures influences the meaning of artifacts. Our pattern of results suggests that individuals imbue artifacts with meaning based not only on their membership in organizations, roles, and social identity groups, but also based on their membership and exposure

to societal-level cultures. The meaning people make of artifacts based on these memberships may have important consequences for individuals and organizations.

In study 2 we examine the consequences of departing from the cultural ideology of minimizing personal referents. Specifically, Study 2 builds on and extends Study 1 by examining the consequences of deviating versus adhering to the minimization script for a job candidate during the job interview process. If organizations systematically pass over candidates who deviate from the cultural imperatives to minimize personal referents, it would provide evidence of one common organizational practice through which this cultural ideology is maintained. In addition, we further examine the implications of this imperative for a culturally diverse pool of applicants. Do organizational recruiters exempt job candidates who are clearly from a different culture from adherence to this schema, or are the rewards and sanctions applied similarly regardless of the cultural background of the individual? These later questions, while exploratory, are included in the next study to provide further understanding about issues relevant in an increasingly multicultural and globally networked workplace.

Study 2

Schemas provide individuals with expectations about what is likely to occur in a given situation, what behaviors are and are not appropriate, and which elements of the situation are important to notice and remember (Fiske & Taylor; Wyer & Gordon, 1982). When one person's behavior (e.g., the job candidate's) violates a schema held by another (e.g., the recruiter), their expectations also are violated. This can matter insofar as people prefer others who are consistent with their schemas over those who are schema-inconsistent (e.g., Hansen, 1989; Sanchez-Burks, Nisbett, & Ybarra, 2000; Wilson & Capitman, 1982), in part because it is

easier to predict the future behavior of schema-consistent others (Ibarra, 1992; Shaw, 1990). As a result, schema violators often are stigmatized (Goffman, 1963).

If the cultural imperative to minimize personal referents at work is in fact consequential, it should affect evaluations of people who exemplify or deviate from this imperative. This type of behavioral evaluation routinely occurs when new employees are being recruited into the organization. Beyond the personal boundary required by law in the interview context itself, we examine the threshold for blurring this boundary when attempting to build rapport with clients, that is, the strategies a prospective employee states they would use in such a hypothetical situation. Organizational practices that control entry into organizations, such as recruitment and hiring, often are particularly useful settings to examine culture (Martin, 2002). Cultural norms often are in strong form, and therefore easiest to assess, at these organizational boundaries because hiring employees who fit with the organization is one important way of ensuring continuity in the organization (Trice & Beyer, 1984).

To investigate this issue, we asked corporate recruiters from American organizations across a diverse range of industries to evaluate the materials from one of four job candidates. Each of the job materials contained a résumé and an essay ostensibly written by the student about what they would say in a meeting with a client to build rapport with the client.[1] The essays were identical except that half the essays included a passage describing a strategy wherein the candidate would make a relatively minor reference to the non-work domain (e.g., complimenting the client's family photo on their desk if one existed). In the other half of the essays, this passage was replaced with one that described a similar strategy of complimenting the client, but in this case on having a nice office window view. All job candidates were presented as intelligent, well-rounded individuals attending a top MBA program. In the present research we focus not on

personal interviews but on an earlier stage in the recruitment process where organizations work to narrow down the pool of prospective candidates using written materials such as a job statement and résumé. This situation allows us to control other cues that may influence evaluations, such as accents or appearance (Leary, 1996; Molinsky, 2005; Strauss, Miles, & Levesque, 2001).

This essay manipulation was crossed with a second variable that focused on the nationality of the applicant. Specifically, the design varied the nationality of the target. Prior research offers competing logics for the evaluation of foreign nationals. Some research has shown that in professional contexts, foreign nationals are viewed more favorably when they demonstrate that they are trying to accommodate American cultural norms (Molinsky, 2005; Thomas & Ravlin, 1995; Thomas & Toyne, 1995). Therefore, we might expect that a foreign national who signals they would minimize personal referents at work will be evaluated more favorably than one who does not. However, it is also possible that recruiters will show more flexibility in their inferences if they recognize that the foreign national is likely to abide by different cultural norms. When recruiters evaluate candidates whose cultural backgrounds provide them with other plausible explanations for behavior that deviates from one's own cultural norms, recruiters may evaluate the candidates' behavior less harshly (Kelley, 1973).

For example, Brazil's work culture, like much of Latin America, has a reputation for including much more personal information in work settings than Americans (Triandis et al., 1984). This cultural pattern even appears in popular materials such as business guidebooks for American managers traveling to Brazil that suggest one emphasize the primary importance of relationships for business success, noting, "Offer your Brazilian counterpart details of your life; show him photographs of your children...Brazilians like to talk about their lives and will ask

what some might view as very personal questions" (Herrington, 1998: 57). If schema congruence matters, recruiters may evaluate a Brazilian candidate who fails to minimize personal referents more favorably than a Brazilian who does minimize personal referents.[2] These competing perspectives on the effect of target's nationality motivated this variable in the present study. Although they preclude *a priori* hypotheses of the effect of foreign nationals candidates' adherence to the minimization norm, we included this variable to provide an empirical perspective on this organizationally relevant issue.

Based on our theoretical arguments about the importance of minimizing personal referents and the findings from study 1 of how this cue is used to infer levels of professionalism, we anticipated that organizational recruiters would more positively evaluate and be more likely to recommend for a formal interview those job candidates whose materials suggest that he or she would adhere to the personal referent minimization norm. Combining this focus on minimization of personal referents with the notion that such minimization may be a less informative cue about cultural newcomers (e.g., Brazilians) who violate cultural imperatives, suggests the following interaction patterns:

Hypothesis 1. Organizational recruiters will more positively evaluate a job candidate whose materials suggest that he or she would adhere to the minimization norm compared to a candidate who would not. This effect will vary as a function of nationality, with a smaller difference in evaluations between norm adherers and norm violators among Brazilians compared to American candidates.

Hypothesis 2. Organizational recruiters will be more likely to recommend for a second interview a job candidate whose materials suggest that he or she would adhere to the

personal referent minimization norm compared to a candidate who would not. This effect will vary as a function of nationality, with a smaller difference in evaluations between norm adherers and norm violators among Brazilians compared to American candidates.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of business school recruiters of a major Midwestern business school. The sample was solicited through an advertisement in the online newsletter of a Midwestern business school's career development office requesting recruiters to complete an online survey. Recruiters who did not initially respond to the online survey were later mailed a hard copy of the materials. In return for participating, two respondents were given a $100 gift certificate based on their accuracy at guessing the final sample size of the study. Sixty-two recruiters of the 412 receiving the newsletter participated in this field experiment. A comparison of the industry demographics available for respondents and non-respondents suggest that the 15% response rate did not produce any sampling bias among industries.

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 each 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. Data on recruiters' nationality showed all but

one was American.[3] Approximately half the participants responded to the online survey and half by mail with no significant differences between the two groups.

Design and Procedures

The cover letter inviting recruiters to participate explained that the study was being conducted to learn more about recruitment, how to improve recruiters' abilities to evaluate job candidates' potential, and to learn more about a novel recruitment technique. This technique involved having candidates provide recruiters with a description, written just prior to the interview, of how they would handle an initial meeting with a potential client to build rapport. The idea behind this process was that it would provide recruiters with additional "real-case" information to use in their recruitment decisions. Participants were asked to read over the materials about an MBA student and then complete a survey about their impressions of the student. The materials included a résumé 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 résumés, 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 at the same university.

Adherence to the minimization attribute of the professionalism schema was manipulated by varying the description provided under the "additional" subheading in the résumés and in the candidate's narrative of the client meeting. In the minimization condition, this section of the resume 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.' The client meeting narrative contained two remarks that either referenced the personal sphere of life (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 $\alpha = .83$). 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 recruiters perceptions of the candidates' general interpersonal and communication skills with the purpose of ensuring these characteristics of the candidates were standardized across conditions and, thus, independent of our hypothesized patterns. 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

Preliminary analyses

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 minimization of personal references, 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. No differences were obtained as a function of the gender of recruiter, and are thus not discussed further in the analyses.

Does adherence to the minimization norm affect evaluations of candidates?

A 2 (Adherence to the minimization norm: yes, no) X 2 (Nationality: American, foreign national) ANOVA was performed on evaluations of the candidates. As predicted there was a significant interaction, $F(1,58) = 8.85$, $p < .01$ showing that recruiters' evaluations varied as a function of candidates' adherence to the minimization norm and nationality. American candidates who did not adhere to the minimization norm were significantly more negatively evaluated ($M = 2.55$, $SD = .44$) compared to those who did adhere to the norm ($M = 3.12$, $SD = .57$), $t(57) = 3.05$, $p < .01$. Moreover there were no significant differences for Brazilian candidates who did or did not adhere to the minimization norm ($M = 2.80$, $SD = .13$, $M = 2.60$, $SD = .12$, respectively), $p < .25$. However, the two foreign national candidates were as negatively evaluated (but not more negatively) as the American candidate who did not adhere to the minimization norm (both p's $> .25$). Moreover, Americans who did adhere to the minimization norm were more positively evaluated compared to the three other candidates, $t(57) = 3.10$, $p < .01$. There were no significant main effects of minimization or nationality (both $p's > .10$). As evidenced by these results, for recruiters, American candidates' adherence or violation of the minimization norm was more consequential than for the Brazilians.

Does adherence to the minimization norm affect recommendations for a second interview?

A 2 (Adherence to the minimization norm: yes, no) X 2 (Nationality: American, foreign national) ANOVA performed on recommendations for a second interview showed a significant interaction between adherence to the minimization norm and nationality, $F(1,57) = 4.29$, $p < .05$. As predicted by hypothesis 2, Americans who did not adhere to the minimization norm and instead suggested making references to personal topics were significantly less likely to receive an invitation for a second interview ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.10$) as compared to those who did not ($M = 4.4$, $SD = .63$), $t(57) = 2.22$, $p < .04$. Also, the chances of a foreign national being

recommended for a second interview did not differ as a function of whether they did or did not adhere to the minimization norm, (M = 3.93, SD = .85, M = 3.73, SD = .53, respectively), $F < 1$. As shown in Figure 3, Americans who adhered to the minimization norm were significantly more likely to receive a second interview compared to the three other candidates, $t(57) = 2.45$, $p < .02$. Finally, Americans who did not adhere to the minimization norm were as unlikely to get that opportunity (but not *more* unlikely) than were either of the two foreign national candidates (both t's < 1). For recruiters, American candidates' adherence or violation of the minimization attribute appears to have provided more meaningful information than the same behavior by similar Brazilian candidates.

Discussion

These results provide evidence across different evaluation criteria that including even minor personal references in the workplace—even as a way to build personal rapport—can have a negative influence on how one is evaluated by recruiters for American companies and success in the recruitment process. This effect emerged only for American candidates, however. Consistent with schema research, business school recruiters appeared to view American candidates' adherence (or violation) of the minimization attribute as valuable information about future behavior. Recruiters were more likely to evaluate them favorably and recommend them for a second interview when they did not deviate from the cultural norm of minimizing personal referents at work.

Consistent with our hypotheses, evaluations of the foreign national (i.e., Brazilian) candidates were relatively unaffected by how often they mentioned personal topics. These results provide further support to the data found in Study 1 showing that the minimization norm is culturally bound. Not only does the minimization norm appear to be learned with experience in

American culture (Study 1), but the rewards associated with adhering to it seem reserved especially for Americans (Study 2).

However, this also suggests that adherence to the minimization norm was not the mechanism behind recruiters' evaluations of Brazilians. What might explain the consistently low evaluations of Brazilian candidates? One possibility is that there was a floor effect in which norm violators and foreign nationals received the lowest ratings a recruiter would typically provide. It is also possible that the results among the foreign national candidates are a result of an out-group bias (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), in which evaluators penalized the Brazilian candidates based on their status as foreigners. However, given the historical moment in which this study occurred, it would be premature to draw this conclusion. Since the September 11th terrorist attacks, companies in the U.S. have increasing difficulty with obtaining the necessary visas for foreign national workers, which increases the cost, logistics, and time required to hire a foreign national. This might make many recruiters more reluctant to recruit such candidates overall. Such a bias could explain the consistently low evaluations for the foreign candidates. Future research will have to address this important question, which has both theoretical and practical reasons.

This study is not without limitations. First, our response rate of 15 percent is relatively low. A close examination of the respondents' demographic characteristics, however, reveals that they represent a diverse range of industries and functions, increasing confidence that the sample is representative of the entire sample of recruiters. In addition, because the sample included only active recruiters, it is known that all respondents had prior experience as evaluators of MBA job candidates. A second limitation is that the design did not manipulate the gender of the candidate (only male job candidates were evaluated). Therefore, the results do not provide information

about how female candidates would be evaluated for adhering to or violating the minimization rule, a question worthwhile to address in future research.

General Discussion

Two studies investigated the notion that an important and consequential cultural characteristic of the professionalism schema in American workplaces is the minimization of personal referents. Study 1 used an inductive paradigm to examine whether such minimization of personal referents contributed to the image of someone considered professional. The results are consistent with this argument and further show that this criterion may be a culturally grounded American construction of professionalism. The more experience participants had in U.S. culture, the more this minimization characteristic differentiated their image of an employee who is professional from one who is unprofessional. Although our study did not include a comprehensive survey of industrialized societies, the diverse background of our participants and the increasing strength of our effects among participants with greater exposure to U.S. culture suggests minimization of personal references at work may not be a universal feature of what it means to be professional. Although other cultures are likely to have a schema and explicit belief about the attributes of professionalism, our results suggest minimizing personal referents may not be as prominent a feature as it is in the U.S.

The results from Study 2 further showed that minimizing personal referents has important consequences for individual job candidates, and this cultural more may be reproduced and reified within a society precisely through such organizational recruitment and hiring preferences. Recruiters rewarded American job candidates for adhering to this schema and punished them for violating it. However, recruiters' selectively applied this criterion to American candidates only. The results suggest that recruiters found schema-relevant behaviors (e.g., referring to one's own

family members) relevant to evaluating an American candidate, but not a similar foreign national candidate one. This pattern of results suggests that our sample of recruiters finds that minimization behaviors are valued indicators of future performance for Americans only; thus, behaviors relevant to the "minimization rule" appear to be informative about Americans, but not necessarily about people who are clearly from other cultures.

A Cultural Perspective on Professionalism

Most recent organizational research on professionalism either focuses on the behaviors of members of occupations predetermined to be "professions" (c.f., Ibarra, 1999; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, in press), or is used to describe an individual's ability to meet normative expectations in any number of work organizations (c.f., Elsbach, 2004; Roberts, 2005). Our research contributes to these research literatures by unpacking a tacit assumption that may underlie much of this behavior: Americans appear to associate "professional" with minimizing personal referents while at work.

Our research also builds upon and extends prior research showing that American relational work patterns are likely to reflect culturally grounded ideologies rather than a universal feature of business culture (Baker, 2004; Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1993; Lipset, 1996; Sanchez-Burks, 2005). This research, which builds upon and integrates research in organizational studies, cultural psychology, and sociology, bolsters Weber's (1904, 1947) argument concerning the lasting influence of prior historical and cultural conditions on contemporary American organizations and relationships in them. Our research contributes to this literature by providing evidence that one aspect of this cultural heritage has become embedded in American schemas of professionalism.

Mapping the Boundaries of Professionalism's Minimization Attribute

It is important to note that while the present research provides insight into the attributes of the schema for professional workplace behavior, our data do not address the extent to which cultural members abide by this schema, how they feel about it, or in what micro-contexts (specific occupational roles or situations) its influence is particularly strong or weak. Thus, we have learned about the cultural rule that appears to be widely shared, but we do not know the extent to which people follow the rule (LeVine, 1973). It resembles the speed limit – widely known, but not always obeyed. Future research is needed to map the boundaries of this effect. Our findings point to several logical extensions.

First, although our studies' samples include a broad range of industries, increasing our confidence that we have captured a meaning that is broadly shared in American workplaces, future research is needed to understand the work contexts in which this schema is particularly valued. It may be, for example, that communicating professionalism is more important in work where one's work effectiveness is dependent on personal reputation (Tsui, 1994). Alternatively, the lay meaning of professionalism studied here may be particularly strong in those occupations or organizations that historically have made some collective effort to attain professional status (Abbott, 1988; Kocka, 1980).

These studies have explored how minimization of personal referents interacts with other salient identities, such as gender and nationality, yet in only limited ways. The results of both studies suggest that it is important to understand how the professionalism schema combines with these other identity categories. For example, the gendered nature of professionalism 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 observers. 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 references are more associated with women than men, it may be that people expect that females' gender identity is something to be attenuated at work. 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, & Beckman, 1998). A topic for future research would be to explore how men and women construct a professional image across such varied organizational contexts. 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.

Recruiters' failure to reward foreign nationals for schema-consistent behavior also 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 acting congruent with the American role schema, internationals remain disadvantaged. These results suggest that more research is needed to understand what impression-management cues would be effective for foreign nationals in critical contexts such as the job interview (c.f., Molinsky, 2005).

Finally, we did not specify the race or ethnic background of the job candidates in Study 2. Research has shown such demographic characteristics affect evaluations of job candidates in hiring decisions (Petersen, Saporta, & Seidel, 2000, 2005; Seidel, Polzer, & Stewart, 2000). Although this limits our ability to generalize our findings, it allowed us to focus in depth on our central interest in this paper: the cultural basis of the professionalism schema. In the future,

researchers should aim to replicate and extend these findings with more diverse groups of targets.

Contribution to Other Literatures

This research contributes to several other streams of research, impression management, boundary theory, and cross-cultural psychology. First, this research provides insight into one way in which culture influences impression-management dynamics in organizations. It complements recent efforts focused on how people actively construct and grant identities in organizations (c.f., Bartel & Dutton, 2001; Creed & Scully, 2000; Roberts, 2005) by examining some of the tacit cultural biases that affect impression formation. By shifting our analysis to the content of the professional schema that affect how a person is perceived, rather than impression-management tactics *per se*, we gain insight into how macro-level concepts, such as national-level culture and history, can shape people's assumptions about what they should do to create a particular impression and shape how impressions are formed.

Second, our studies contribute to recent research on individuals' boundary management of work and non-work roles (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000; Kossek, Noe, & DeMarr, 1999) by demonstrating how societal-level culture affects the schemas individuals hold about the appropriate place to draw the line between work and non-work roles. Researchers in this tradition have proposed that culture influences individuals' boundary management strategies and preferences (Ashforth, 2001). To the best of our knowledge, this is the first research to investigate empirically how culture influences individuals' boundary management.

Finally, in the eyes of recruiters for American organizations, candidates whose strategy for building rapport with a client includes personal references 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 is reproduced and institutionalized over time 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 (Trice & Beyer, 1984; Schein, 1992). In this way, our Study 2 findings provide a perspective often overlooked in cross-cultural psychology research: the role of institutions in sustaining and enforcing cultural patterns of thought and action (Zucker, 1991).

Conclusion

We have drawn from multiple literatures to bring a novel perspective to the broad issue of professionalism in organizations. Our empirical findings support prior cultural and historical arguments about a tacit meaning associated with professionalism, namely the imperative to minimize symbolically and behaviorally the personal sphere of life while at work. Given the widespread use of the expression 'act professional' and the valuable outcomes associated with it, this research has practical as well as theoretical import. The present research hopefully will generate further interest in understanding how social-historical and cultural contexts shape the tacit understanding that underlies the process of perceiving, conveying, and evaluating impressions in organizations. At least in the realm of professionalism, turning to the past has revealed some of the cultural rules that are can easily be taken for granted in the present and affect individual futures.

Footnotes

[1] To develop the study materials, we interviewed experienced recruiters and representatives of a business school recruiting office to generate study materials that would have high face validity for our sample. Based on their suggestions, we set the study in the context of building rapport with a client because recruiters reported that they often struggle to discern whether job candidates are capable of interacting appropriately with potential clients.

[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] We unintentionally failed to include the question about the recruiters' nationality on about half of our printed surveys (i.e., those that were distributed through the mail). Because half our responses came from the mail surveys, we only have data on the recruiters' nationality for half of the sample. The career development office reviewed the sample with us, and based on their knowledge of the sample, suggested that the sample was almost entirely American.

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Figure Captions

Figure 1. Proportion of personal referents 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 referents 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 referents and nationality. Error bars represent one between-subjects standard error.

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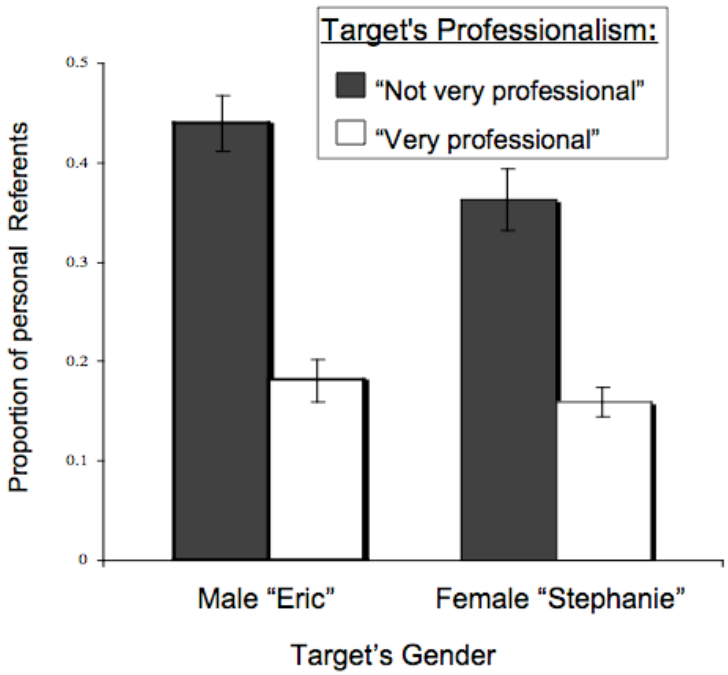
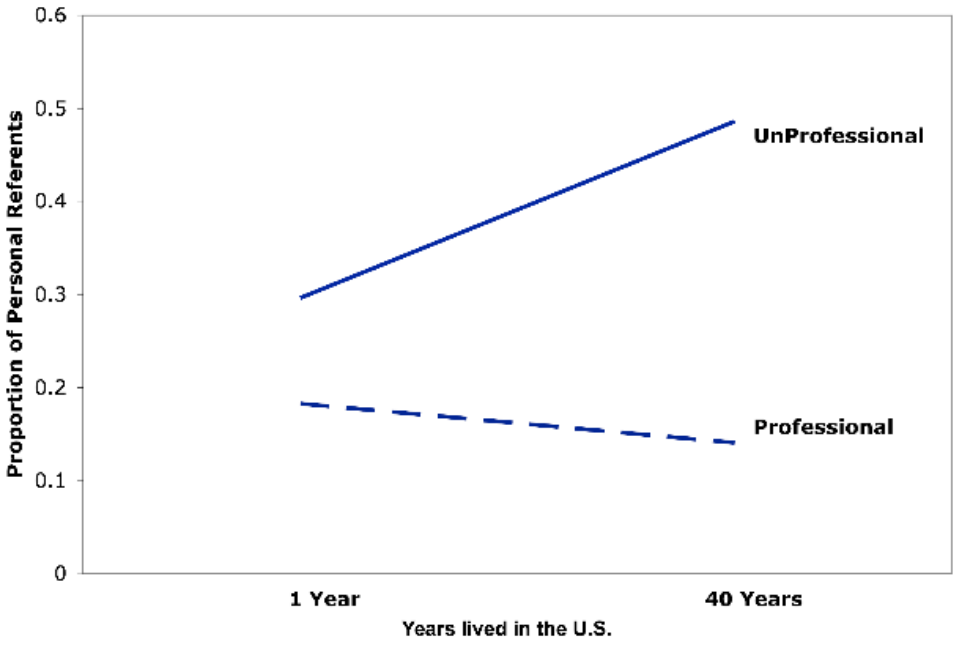


Figure 2. Proportion of personal referents used to reconstruct an employee's office as a function of years participants lived in the U.S. and target's reputation as a professional.



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