

Chapter 10

Selection in Egalitarian Australia: Weighted Average or Motivational Gravity?

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Résumés and application forms are used in virtually every selection process, including the employment interview, which is the most frequently used method for selecting employees. At the more basic pre-interview stage however, selectors examine a candidate's paper credentials, in order to form an initial impression (Anderson & Shackleton, 1993). Studies have shown that these early impressions are crucial in the selection process as a whole (Binning, Goldstein, Garcia & Scattaregia, 1988; Dipboye, 1982, 1992; Dougherty, Turban, & Callender, 1994; Macan & Dipboye, 1994). Yet few studies, if any, have manipulated impression management factors to observe their effect directly, despite growing interest in impression management as a theoretical framework for organisational science (Giacalone & Beard, 1994). The present study aims to investigate the influence of one central issue in any pre-interview application, namely the number of achievements presented in an initial job application.

Weighted averaging

Perhaps the most widely accepted contemporary model of impression formation is the WAM or Weighted Averaging Model (Anderson, 1981). Applied to the impression formed from a job candidate's résumé and/or biographical details, this model proposes that the impression of an applicant is formed from a weighted average of all the information the interviewer or selector has attended to in the candidate's application. Anderson's Western research (1965, 1974) presented highly positive trait adjectives to participants and supplemented them with marginally positive ones. The results supported the WAM of impression formation, since only information that was more favourable than the existing average improved impressions, and the addition of marginally positive adjectives resulted in a decreased impression score. Anderson's model therefore suggests that job applicants should only mention highly positive traits. Moreover, all else being equal, the number of achievements or positive personality traits presented should not, in itself, influence impression ratings.

Some findings on the use of impression management tactics at interview, however, appear to challenge the WAM. In the United States, Aronson, Willerman, and Floyd (1966) found that equally able candidates were liked less when they had no flaws than when they made a minor blunder. More recently, Baron (1986) found that when female job applicants emitted positive non-verbal cues (e.g., smiling, leaning towards the interviewer), or used an artificial body scent, their interview ratings, from male raters, were enhanced. But when these same two tactics were used together, impression ratings declined. Baron termed this a "too much of a good thing" effect. In the United Kingdom, Keenan (1982) found that low rather than high Mach(iavellian)s were more likely to succeed at interview, perhaps because the latter were perceived to be relatively immoral. In Australia, Gallois, Callan, and Palmer (1992) found that both non-assertive *and* over-assertive (aggressive) candidates were rated as less likeable, and less employable, than moderately assertive ones.

Motivational gravity

These studies consistently suggest that there may be an optimal level of impression management, beyond which the WAM does not accurately predict either liking or overall impression. Carr (1994, 1996) has suggested that likeability and impression may be subject to the influence of "motivational gravity," namely attempts to put or bring the individualistic achiever back down to earth (Carr & MacLachlan, 1997). Motivational gravity has its origins in both (1) the increased job insecurity that has accompanied

the internationalization of market environments and (2) a clash between the workplace ethos of self-promotion versus wider cultural norms that favor loyalty to the group. These two factors may combine to result in high achieving employees being “pushed down” rather than “pulled up” by insecure superiors, and “pulled down” rather than “pushed up” by coworker peers.

In particular, Carr and MacLachlan (1997) have predicted that high achievers in more egalitarian settings, such as those often found in Australia, could be relatively exposed to motivational gravity (because self-promotion can sometimes be an anathema to the egalitarian), with the “quiet” achiever creating a more favourable impression on both future bosses and future colleagues. According to this model, therefore, we ought to find a motivational gravity “dip” with Australian applicants who present themselves to prospective employers and fellow employees as very high achievers (Carr, 1994).

In order to be reasonably confident that this dip was the result of motivational gravity, rather than Baron’s “too much of a good thing,” it would be prudent to measure attitudes towards the high achiever, in order to link those directly to any lowered impressions. Feather’s (1989) “Tall Poppy Scale” has been developed specifically to measure such attitudes in the Australian context, where it has proved to be a reliable measure of attitudes towards achievement (in Australian folklore, “tall poppies” are tall flowers that must be chopped down). We therefore expected that raters who recorded negative attitudes towards the tall poppy would be more likely to downgrade a job candidate, all else being equal.

Gender

Studies of interviewer decision making in other cultures have found that females are rated less favourably than males, even if they have identical qualifications (Arvey, 1979; Bigoness, 1976; Dipboye, Fromkin, & Wiback, 1975; Paludi & Strayer, 1985). Research also suggests that stereotypes of women’s abilities and roles may stifle women’s achievement, as women are often given less credit for occupational success, and are blamed more if they fail (Forgas, 1985; Paludi, 1990). These negative stereotypes towards women’s abilities, and achievements, may explain the lower ratings females tend to receive in interview situations, since studies have shown that people are more likely to employ or promote applicants whose past successes have been attributed to ability (Paludi, 1990; Tucker & Rowe, 1979). The same tendencies to downgrade women’s achievements have been observed in Australia (Feather & Simon, 1975; Ashkanasy, 1994; Karpin, 1995), even among prospective women managers (Power, 1994). Thus, all else being equal, Australian women candidates may be more likely than men to attract/evoke selector intentions to chop down the tall poppy.

Hypotheses

- H₁. In the function relating number of job applicant’s achievements to initial impression regarding employment, there will be an optimum beyond which we will witness a significant dip in the curve.
- H₂. Individual raters whose attitudes are anti achievement will tend to give lower impression ratings.
- H₃. Female rather than male candidates will tend to attract lower impression ratings, even though they have the same number of achievements.

Experiment 1

Like Aronson et al (1966), Anderson (1965, 1974) asked participants to rate how much they thought they would “like” hypothetical people described, an impression that Moscovici (1976) has distinguished from admiration. Alternatively, Anderson and Shackleton (1993) discuss the overall impression participants formed of an applicant. With respect to these various approaches therefore, participants in our study were asked to give their overall impression of, as well as how much they both liked and admired, the applicant.

Method

Participants

A convenience sample of one hundred and six third year psychology students volunteered to participate in this experiment. There were 42 males, and 64 females, and the average age of the group was 24.8 years. One-hundred and two of these participants were either born in Australia, or were Australian citizens.

Apparatus

Following Asch (1946), questionnaires described a job applicant who had listed positive trait descriptors in a job application/résumé. The use of traits was based on Wheeler et al's (1969) finding that people can be competitive about traits, suggesting in turn that they are analogous to personal achievements for the purposes of job applications. Half of the questionnaires described a male and the other half a female applicant. A stimulus list of adjectives was selected by the use of the MRC psycholinguistic database (Colheart, 1981), in which a minimum Kucera and Francis (1967) word frequency of one occurrence per million, and a minimum Thorndike and Lorge (1944) word frequency of one, were specified as criteria.

This list of adjectives was then examined by ten associates (five males and five females) in order to filter out any words not appropriate to the positive description of a job applicant. The final stimulus list contained 122 positive adjectives, which were then randomly assigned to questionnaires in sets of either 5, 10, 15, or 20, by the use of a program written to operate within "Microsoft Access for Windows."

On the reverse side of the questionnaire was the Tall Poppy Scale (Feather, 1989), which measures attitudes towards high achievers. This internally reliable Likert scale has been developed on samples from the Australian student population (Feather, 1989, 1991a; 1994). It contains two orthogonal subscales. Ten Favour Reward (FR) items assess tendencies to push up the high achiever (e.g., "People who are very successful deserve all the rewards they get for their achievements"). Ten Favour Fall (FF) items assess tendencies to pull down the high achiever (e.g., "People who are tall poppies should be cut down to size"). Each item requires participants to respond by using a six-point scale labeled +3 (I agree very much), +2 (I agree on the whole), +1 (I agree a little), -1 (I disagree a little), -2 (I disagree on the whole), and -3 (I disagree very much).

Procedure

Each participant was given a questionnaire containing a unique list of either 5, 10, 15, or 20 positive adjectives, describing positive personality traits that either a male or female job applicant (also randomized) had supposedly presented in an application letter/résumé. After reading these descriptions, for a job in their own (imaginary) office, participants rated the applicant out of 10 for overall impression, liking, and admiration, and were invited to justify their answer in each case. Participants then recorded their age, gender, country of origin, and nationality.

On the reverse of the page, participants were asked to complete the Tall Poppy Scale. Scores were analysed according to the procedure of Feather (1989; 1991a), the integer "4" being added to all scores, so that all responses were positive and ranged from 1 through to 7. Each participant's 10 responses for FR and FF subscales were then added independently to give a total score out of 70 for each subscale.

Results

Four questionnaires contained outliers or were incomplete, and these participants' data were removed from further analysis. This left 39 male and 63 female participants. From semi-partial correlation coefficients, it was ascertained that ratings of liking explained a significant proportion of the variance in overall impression ratings, $F = 33.53$, $p = 0.00$, $R\text{-sq (adj)} = 24.4\%$, but that ratings of admiration did not, $F = 3.38$, $p = 0.069$, $R\text{-sq (adj)} = 2.3\%$. The latter variable was therefore dropped from subsequent analyses.

Two independent Analyses of Covariance (ANOCOVAs) were computed, on ratings of overall impression and on liking. In each analysis, the independent variable was the number of positive traits listed, with the covariates being score on FR and score on FF, as well as the participant's gender. Compared to female participants, males scored significantly higher on FF ($F(1, 101) = 3.94, p = .05$) and significantly lower on FR ($F(1, 101) = 8.05, p = .006$).

Overall impression ratings were significantly influenced by the number of adjectives presented ($F(3, 101) = 4.09, p = .009$). Post hoc analysis revealed that the mean overall impression ratings for applicants described with 5, 10, and 15 positive adjectives, were significantly higher than those for 20 positive adjectives (Tukey's $HSD = .021$). From Figure 1, as the number of adjectives increased, overall impression first increased and then decreased. Number of adjectives also influenced liking ($F(3, 101) = 3.01, p = .034$). Figure 1 also shows a marked drop as the number of adjectives increases. The mean rating for 5, 10, and 15 positive adjectives was again significantly higher than for 20 adjectives (Tukey's $HSD = .043$).

A content analysis of participants' explanations for their ratings revealed that in order to explain the influence of anti-achievement sentiments on the decrease in impression ratings (or the "motivational gravity dip"), we need to tease apart the exertion of gravity from too much of a good thing. For overall impression, 43 percent of participants simply expressed the theme that the applicant was suitable for employment; but 23 percent also said that the applicant was too good to be true, while 13 percent reported that the candidate was too positive or overconfident, and eight percent said that they did not like the candidate. For liking, 40 percent explained simply that they would like someone with these traits, but 12 percent reported too much of a good thing while 23 percent and 18 percent reported overconfidence and dislike respectively.

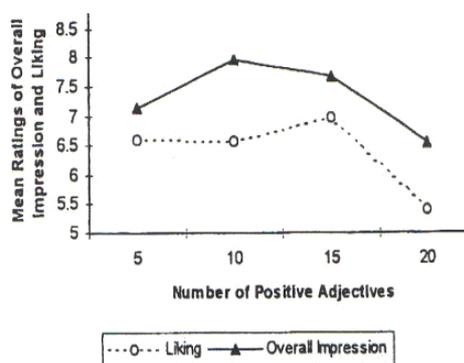


Figure 1. Number of positive trait descriptors and mean overall impression.

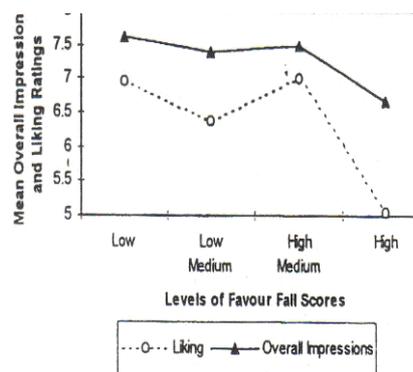


Figure 2. Mean ratings of liking and overall Impression by Favour Fall.

The relationship between FF scores and ratings of overall impression approached significance ($F(1, 101) = 3.60, p = .061$). Scores for the FF subscale were then coded into quartiles (low, low medium, high medium, high). From Figure 2, participants who scored high on FF tended to form a lower overall impression of applicants. That tendency reached significance with respect to liking ($F(1, 101) = 9.24, p = .003$). This finding indicates that motivational gravity was operating alongside too much of a good thing.

From Figure 3, there was a significant interaction between the number of positive adjectives and the gender of the applicant ($F(3, 101) = 3.17, p = .024$). This interaction indicates that ratings on overall impression tended to dip more rapidly for applicants who were female rather than male.

Discussion

Beyond 15 adjectives, the WAM failed to predict what impressions the participant would form, with a dip occurring at 20 positive traits (H_1). Since tall poppy attitudes influenced ratings significantly, this finding probably cannot be attributed solely to too much of a good thing (H_2). Moreover, and as predicted in H_3 ,

women candidates seem to have attracted motivational gravity more readily than their male counterparts, even though their achievements were exactly the same.

Although FF scores were related to reduced impressions, there was no indication that FR had any influence on ratings. This might have been due to our choice of personality traits as stimuli (which are perhaps not particularly “rewardable”) rather than actual achievements (which clearly are). Thus, we needed an experiment that dealt directly with real achievements.

Experiment 2

This experiment replicates experiment 1, except that participants read a list of 5, 10, 15, or 20 school-related achievements (e.g., dux, public speaking award, won statewide English competition). Having made this change, we expected the pattern of results obtained in Experiment 1 to replicate, with the additional finding that FR scores would now be related to ratings of the candidate.

Method

Participants

A convenience sample of two hundred and six, first year psychology students volunteered to participate in this experiment. Forty-six participants were male, and 160 were female, the average age of the group being 24.1 years.

Materials

The stimulus list of achievements was derived by asking 10 associates to list achievements which they thought might be regarded as suitable for placing on a job application letter or résumé. The resulting stimulus list contained 28 achievements, that were randomly assigned to questionnaires in sets of either 5, 10, 15, or 20.

Procedure

The questionnaire first asked participants to imagine that they had not attended university this year, and had been employed in an office instead. Participants were informed that part of this job involved the evaluation of application forms and résumés for other jobs in their office. They then read a list of either 5, 10, 15, or 20 achievements, which were ascribed to a male or female job applicant.

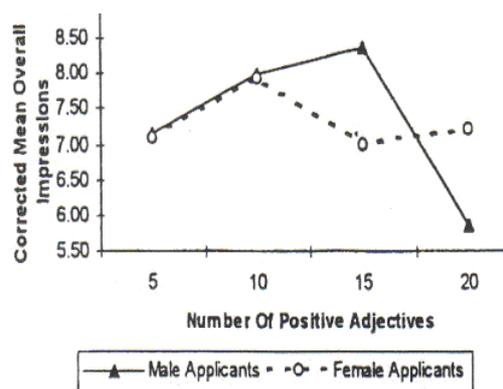


Figure 3. Trait descriptors, mean impressions and candidate gender

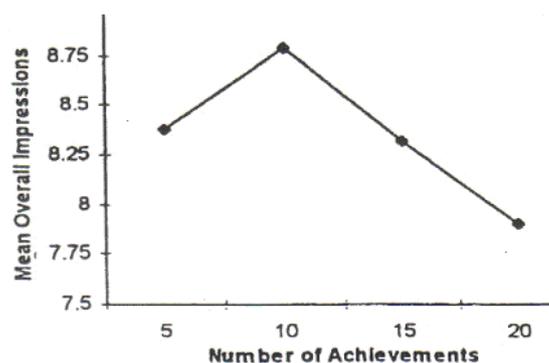


Figure 4. Mean number of positive achievements and mean overall impressions.

Results

Due to a ceiling effect on participants’ ratings and consequent violation of the assumptions of MANCOVA, we used Kruskal-Wallis one-way between-subjects ANOVAs and Mann-Whitney tests.

The number of achievements presented approached having a significant influence on the mean ranking of overall impression ratings ($H(3) = 6.9, p = .075$). Further analysis revealed that the mean of the ranked

impression scores for 10 achievements was significantly higher than for five achievements ($\underline{W} = 2309.5$, $p = .03$), and for 20 achievements ($\underline{W} = 3148$, $p = .02$). From Figure 4, the optimal overall impression was formed when the applicant presented 10 achievements.

In an effort to assess whether these effects might generalise beyond the student population, we examined the overall impression ratings given by participants over 30 years of age. We reasoned that these people were likely to have been involved in some kind of selection procedure, and therefore would be indicators of how real selectors might make decisions. It was found that the number of achievements that applicants presented approached having a significant influence on the mean ranking of overall impression ratings ($\underline{H}(3) = 7.00$, $p = .073$). Given the small sample involved here, this finding suggests that our study is, potentially, relevant in real world settings.

A content analysis of participants' explanations for their ratings showed that a mixture of distrust and envy may once again have been contributing towards overall impression and liking. For overall impression, in addition to suitability for employment (79 percent of participants), there were reports of being too good to be true (10 percent) and concerns about the applicant becoming too arrogant and/or dominant if (s)he got the job (eight percent). For liking, in addition to simply liking the applicant (39 percent), the equivalent figures were two percent and 20 percent, with other participants anticipating that they would envy (11 percent) or dislike (14 percent) the candidate if appointed.

Also once again, male participants appeared higher on FF ($\underline{F}(1, 204) = 3.22$, $p = .074$), and lower on FR ($\underline{F}(1, 204) = 4.62$, $p = .033$). Post hoc analysis revealed that male participants' overall impression ratings were significantly lower than female participants' ratings ($\underline{H}(1) = 10.27$, $p < .001$), while male participants thought that they would like the applicant less than would female participants ($\underline{H}(1) = 5.64$, $p = 0.018$).

FF and FR scores approximated a normal distribution, and were therefore coded into quartiles as either low, low medium, high medium, or high. While the relationship between FF scores and overall impression ratings was not significant ($\underline{H}(3) = 2.56$, $p = .667$), there was a significant negative correlation between FF scores and ratings of overall impression ($r = -.175$, $p < .05$). There was also a significant relationship between the level of FR scores and ratings of overall impression ($\underline{H}(3) = 8.85$, $p = .032$). The more that participants favoured the fall of the high achiever, the lower the impression they tended to form, while the more they favoured the reward of the tall poppy, the higher their overall impression tended to be.

This same pattern as repeated for liking. The more that participants tended to favour the fall of high achievers, the less they liked the applicant ($\underline{H}(3) = 10.85$, $p = .013$), while the more they tended to favour the reward of high achievers, the more they liked the applicant ($\underline{H}(3) = 15.45$, $p = .002$).

In this second experiment, the applicant's gender did not interact significantly with number of achievements.

Discussion

As expected, there was an optimal number of achievements to be listed on paper credentials. This cannot be attributed to a "negative weighting information bias" (Anderson, 1992), since the achievements in question were all positive. Tall poppy attitudes also influenced the impressions of some participants. Those over the age of 30 also seemed to be sensitive to an optimum number of achievements, suggesting that the results of this study may generalise to real interview situations in Australia. However, liking did not significantly decrease as the number of adjectives increased, providing some support for the WAM. In experiment 2, there were fewer gender effects, but the proportion of female participants had almost doubled, and they may have been less prone to tall poppy attitudes, as well as possibly more generous with their ratings generally.

General discussion

The results of this study extend the research that has demonstrated the negative influence that too much impression management can have on interviewers' hiring decisions (Baron, 1986; Gallois et al, 1992; Keenan, 1982). Our findings suggest (1) that "over" impression management of achievements may occur at the pre-interview stage, in egalitarian populations and cultural settings, (2) that individual differences in motivational gravity may contribute towards this tendency, and (3) [for trait-related achievements] that female candidates may be more susceptible to gravitational attitudes, particularly from males. These findings relate to the pre-interview stage, and thus would seem applicable to both unstructured and structured interviews.

In both studies, a proportion of participants' responses to their ratings of overall impression and liking stated that the applicant was "too good to be true." This suggests that as well as tall poppy intentions, distrust also contributed to the observed decreases in ratings as achievements increased in number. Although our findings linked impressions to motivational gravity, future research will need to assess to what extent participants form a lower overall impression of high achievers due to tall poppy attitudes, or as a result of sheer distrust. One way of (statistically) controlling for the latter would be to include a structured measure of it. Another, perhaps more efficient method would be to inform participants that the achievements had already been verified.

A further distinction that remains to be properly addressed is whether our findings apply to pull down (by coworker peers) and/or push down (by insecure bosses). In the present study, the participation of students meant that we may have been observing pull down, and indeed Carr and MacLachlan (1997) have argued that this may be more likely than push down in an Australian setting. On the other hand, we observed signs of gravity among the older students, who might well have had managerial and selection experience. Although the advice of peers is quite commonly sought (for example in the selection of academics), future research needs to clarify whether those in superior, decision-making positions will display a tendency to *push* down (reject) high achievers, as well as whether this might (sometimes) preempt future friction with coworker peers later on. The same point might also extend to making decisions about who will "get the chop" during *downsizing*.

Regarding the generalisability of our findings, some research has shown that experienced interviewers make similar decisions to, and are prone to the same biases as, students (Arvey and Campion, 1982; Dipboye, Fromkin & Wiback, 1975; Jackson, Peacock, & Smith, 1980). Australian research has also shown that negative attitudes towards high achievers exist not only in student groups, but also in the wider Australian population (Feather, 1989, 1991a). This study therefore suggests that in Australia, the way positive information is assimilated into an overall impression of a job applicant cannot be fully explained by a purely cognitive "averaging" process, as proposed by the currently dominant model of person perception and impression formation. To more fully represent the way impressions are formed in evaluative situations, models of selection may need to be adjusted to account for cultural, social, and individual differences in how coworkers (and perhaps superiors) are likely to view personal achievement.

With regard to regional relevance, it has been suggested in this journal that motivational gravity may require management in terms of staff selection and development (Carr, MacLachlan, & Schultz, 1995). Consistent with those suggestions, Ashkanasy (1997) has found that Australian supervisors regarded high ability subordinates as being relatively undeserving of reward for high performance, while, in Papua New Guinea, Bau and Dyck (1992) found that Defence Force selection test scores were related, *negatively*, to performance ratings given later by superior officers. One possible interpretation of this finding is in terms of motivational gravity. The superior officers may have perceived some kind of threat to their position from the more able subordinates, and as a reaction to that exerted "push down" in their performance appraisals. If our interpretation is correct, then the motivational gravity dip may not be confined to selection or appraisal in Australia.

Summary

All else being equal, the Weighted Averaging Model of person perception (Anderson, 1981) predicts that the number of achievements listed on a job application will not influence the impression formed, whereas the concept of Motivational Gravity suggests (Carr, 1994) that there will be an inverted 'U' function in work cultures that are egalitarian. In egalitarian Australia, a sample of 312 undergraduates rated their overall impression of an imaginary job candidate who had listed from 5 to 20 randomly generated, but job related and positive personality traits, or achievements, in a job application. Impressions first rose and then fell significantly, especially for female candidates and among raters who were anti-achievement. These findings support the Motivational Gravity model, as well as indicating a possible selection bias in Australian and other centripetal work cultures in the South Pacific region.

Acknowledgement

We are grateful to our two anonymous reviewers for their constructive and helpful advice on an earlier draft of this paper.

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