

# Impression Management, Overclaiming, and Perceived Unethical Conduct: The Role of Male and Female Managers

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**ABSTRACT.** This study examines the impact of impression management and overclaiming on self-reported ethical conduct of 174 managers (67 male, 107 female) who worked for a large not-for-profit organization. As anticipated, impression management and overclaiming positively influenced perceived unethical conduct of managers. Female managers were more prone to impression management than male managers. There was no significant difference in perceived unethical conduct or level of overclaiming of male and female managers.

In the last few years several authors have indicated a need for quality empirical research in business ethics (e.g., Randall and Gibson, 1990).

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A recent review of the literature even identified various promising avenues for empirical research in business ethics (Robertson, 1993). One commonly used observation technique in empirical research is self-reported questionnaires (Randall and Gibson, 1990). One major limitation of self-reported questionnaires is that subjects often find it difficult to respond accurately to items on sensitive topics. Their responses are often biased by their perception of what is a "socially acceptable" or "correct" answer.

This bias, called social desirability bias, can affect variable means (Peterson and Kerin, 1981), influence variable relationships (Zerbe and Paulhus, 1987), and lead to misleading research results (Fisher, 1993). Social desirability bias has been observed in self-reported measures used in various disciplines including education (Peltier and Walsh, 1990), management (Brookhouse *et al.*, 1986), marketing (Fisher, 1993), organizational behavior (Zerbe and Paulhus, 1987), and psychology (Robinette, 1991).

## **Social desirability bias**

Social desirability bias could be more critical in ethics than other disciplines due to its sensitive nature. However, only two empirical research articles since 1960 have addressed this issue. Stevens (1984) found that there was no statistically significant relationship between responses by students and executives on the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale and Clark's Personal Ethics Scale. Randall and Fernandes

(1991) used a sample of college students to examine social desirability response bias in self-reported ethical conduct. They found that self-reported ethical conduct was more closely associated with impression management than with a tendency to avoid disapproval as measured by the M-C Scale (p. 813).

The M-C Scale which assumes to reflect a need for social approval has been criticized on two dimensions. Firstly, research indicates that it measures the impulse to avoid disapproval rather than the need to seek social approval (Crandall, 1966; Milham, 1974). Secondly, the scales do not differentiate between two distinct and independent social desirability factors, self-deception and impression management (Paulhus, 1984). Self-deception refers to the unconscious tendency to see oneself favorably (Paulhus, 1984). In self-deception, respondents actually believe that positively biased self-descriptions are true (Zerbe and Paulhus, 1987). On the other hand, impression management refers to a conscious presentation of a false front (Zerbe and Paulhus, 1987). This includes lying and faking responses to create a favorable impression. Randall and Fernandes (1991) in their student sample found that unlike self-deception, impression management showed a significant correlation with one of the most popular ethics scale, the Ruch and Newstrom scale (1975). They suggested that future researchers should use the impression management scale to investigate social desirability bias. Therefore we hypothesize:

H<sub>1</sub>: Perceived unethical conduct is positively influenced by impression management.

### Overclaiming by respondents

We have so far suggested that some people distort their responses to survey questions because they see some descriptions as being socially desirable or undesirable. But it is possible that respondents' responses are *not* distorted but are a true reflection of the state of affairs at the workplace. Thus different levels of impression management may be associated with different levels of perceived unethical conduct. In this study, we do not

observe actual behavior (ethical or unethical) of the subjects at the workplace and compare it to their self-reported responses to examine the above discrepancy. It is obvious this would be expensive and difficult. An alternative method developed by Phillips and Clancy (1972) was used to examine this issue.

Phillips and Clancy (1972) developed "overclaiming" scales which would indicate if respondents actually perform claimed behavior. These scales asked the respondents questions on their use of various nonexistent products and services. Those who scored high on this scale were called "overclaimers". Phillips and Clancy (1972) found that people who scored high on the overclaiming scales also scored high on social desirability scales. They concluded that people did not actually perform claimed behavior and that social desirability bias influenced reporting behavior. Randall and Fernandes (1991) reached a similar conclusion when they found that overclaiming was significantly correlated with the impression management scale. We thus hypothesize

H<sub>2</sub>: Overclaiming is positively associated with propensity for impression management.

Randall and Fernandes (1991) in an exploratory analysis found that those who scored high on the overclaiming scales identified questionable practices on the Ruch and Newstrom ethics scale as ethical. Although they did not discuss this finding in detail, we found these results counterintuitive. Overclaiming scales measure a respondent's attempt to deceive on a survey. We would expect overclaimers to respond lower to self-reported unethical conduct. Based on this line of reasoning we hypothesize:

H<sub>3</sub>: Overclaiming is positively associated with self-reported unethical conduct.

### Sex of respondent

Linden *et al.* (1986) in a sample of undergraduate students found that while impression management tendencies in the two sexes were similar, females consistently reported more somatic

symptoms and psychological distress. Tyson (1990), in a study of undergraduate students, suggested that female managers enter the workplace with higher ethical expectations than men. But previous research has indicated that practicing managers and college students respond differently to ethics related questions (Stevens, 1984; Arlow and Ulrich, 1980; Hollon and Ulrich, 1979). One of the purposes of this research is to investigate if male and female managers exhibit different levels of impression management, overclaiming, and unethical conduct. We thus hypothesize:

- H<sub>4</sub>: Male and female managers will exhibit different levels of impression management, overclaiming, and perceived unethical conduct.

## Methods

The sample for this study consisted of a national sample of 252 middle level managers of a large not-for-profit organization. The subjects were participants of a management development program sponsored by their organization. 206 managers responded to the survey. After listwise deletion of missing values, we were left with a sample of 174 respondents (67 males and 107 females). This gave us a useable response rate of 69 percent. An average subject was 37 years old and had 11 years of work experience. The following scales were used to measure variables of interest.

### *Ruch and Newstrom ethics scale (1975)*

This is one of the most popular scales used to measure perceptions of unethical conduct (Randall and Fernandes, 1991). Managers were asked to respond to 17 business practices on a five point scale (5 = very unethical, . . . , and 1 = not at all unethical). The scores on the items were summed to get a scale score for each respondent. The Cronbach alpha (internal-consistency reliability) for the scale was 0.83.

### *Overclaiming Scales*

These scales were originally developed by (Phillips and Clancy (1972) and later modified by Randall and Fernandes (1991). Managers were asked to indicate their degree of familiarity (3 = very familiar, 2 = somewhat familiar, and 1 = not at all familiar) with ten non-existent items in various categories like newly released movies, television programs, products, music albums, and designer labels. Overclaiming scale ranged from 10 to 30. A score of 30 indicated that the respondent was very familiar with the non-existent item. The Cronbach alpha (internal-consistency reliability) for the scale was 0.68.

### *Impression management scale*

The impression management scale used in this study was developed by Paulhaus (1984). Respondents were asked to respond to 10 items applicable to them on a seven point scale (1 = always false, . . . , and 7 = always true). Four of these items were reverse-coded. These 10 items are summed to provide a score on the impression management scale. The Cronbach alpha (internal-consistency reliability) for the scale was 0.47.

## Findings

Table I reports correlations among variables of interest. Hypothesis 1 examined the relationship between impression management and perceived unethical conduct. We expected impression management to positively influence perceived unethical conduct. The correlation between the scores on the impression management scale and the unethical conduct scale was 0.39 ( $p \leq 0.01$ ). Thus the first hypothesis was supported.

Hypothesis 2 examined the relationship between overclaiming and impression management. We expected overclaiming to be positively associated with propensity for impression management. The correlation between the scores on the impression management scale and the

TABLE I  
Pearson correlations between variables of interest

Variables	1	2	3
(1) Ruch & Newstrom's scale	—		
(2) Impression management scale	0.39**	—	
(3) Overclaiming scale	0.19*	0.17*	—

\*  $p < 0.05$

\*\*  $p < 0.01$

unethical conduct scale was 0.17 ( $p \leq 0.05$ ). This supports the second hypothesis of our study.

Hypothesis 3 examined the relationship between overclaiming and self-reported unethical conduct. We expected overclaiming to be positively associated with self-reported unethical conduct. The correlation between the scores on the above two scales was 0.19 ( $p \leq 0.05$ ). Thus the third hypothesis of our study was also supported.

Hypothesis 4 examined the impact of the sex of the respondents on impression management, overclaiming, and perceived unethical conduct. We expected to find differences in the responses of male and female managers. Table II presents means of total scores for male and female respondents for each of the three scales. Male and female respondents exhibited different responses

TABLE II  
Means of total scores for male and female respondents<sup>a</sup>

Variables	Means		<i>t</i> -value
	Male	Female	
(1) Ruch & Newstrom's scale	72.10	73.03	-0.85
(2) Impression management scale	46.06	48.89	-3.10**
(3) Overclaiming scale	10.50	10.57	0.26

<sup>a</sup>  $n = 67$  (males), 107 (females)

\*  $p < 0.05$

\*\*  $p < 0.01$

on the impression management scale ( $t = -3.10$ ,  $p \leq 0.01$ ) only. Thus hypothesis 4 was partially supported.

## Discussion

The present study uses a sample of middle-level managers to validate and extend the work done by Randall and Fernandes (1991) on social desirability bias in ethics research. Respondents did distort their responses on the ethics survey. As anticipated, impression management and overclaiming positively influenced perceived unethical conduct of managers. Female managers were more prone to impression management than male managers. There was no significant difference in perceived unethical conduct or level of overclaiming of male and female managers.

The results of this study question the validity of ethics studies using self-reported data. In spite of various steps taken by us to assure the respondents that this was an anonymous survey, impression management and overclaiming still had a significant impact on self-reported ethical conduct. It would not be speculative to state that this effect may be larger in studies conducted in less non-threatening situations. Thus research that does not control or compensate for impression management and overclaiming may lead to misleading conclusions. Indirect questioning (Fisher, 1993), randomized response method (Dalton and Metzgar, 1992), and computer administration of questions (Lautenschlager and Flaherty, 1990) are some of the alternatives suggested to minimize social desirability bias. Another option suggested by researchers is to correct the relationship between the variables of interest by removing the influence of social desirability bias through statistical techniques (Ganster *et al.*, 1983).

The impression management scale had a low internal-consistency reliability ( $\alpha = 0.47$ ). Like any other measure, the coefficient alpha should be used with caution. Coefficient alpha is useful when item-specific variance in a unidimensional test is of interest (Cortina, 1993). Although previous research has reported higher alpha values, a high alpha does not mean that the scale is unidimensional (Cortina, 1993). Factor

analysis indicated that this scale is multidimensional. Future research needs to investigate various dimensions of impression management and its impact on ethical conduct and ethical behavior.

Since overclaiming scales are an unambiguous measure of a respondents attempt to misrepresent on a questionnaire, future researchers must make more use of these scales to detect the presence of social desirability bias. Randall and Fernandes (1991) found that overclaiming students reported higher unethical conduct. In our study, overclaimers reported lower unethical conduct and higher ethical conduct. It is possible that the relation between overclaiming and self-reported ethical conduct is influenced by the stage of moral development or the basis of ethical reasoning of the respondents. It is also possible that the managers of our sample, unlike the student sample of Randall and Fernandes (1991), were operating in the higher stages of moral development and were therefore using the principle-centered reasoning (Frederick, *et al.*, 1992; Kohlberg, 1981). Future research should examine this issue. More research also needs to be done on why people overclaim and if it is a conscious or an unconscious tendency on part of the respondents.

There was no significant difference in the levels of self-reported ethical conduct or overclaiming between male and female managers. But female managers in our sample exhibited a significantly higher level of impression management. This indicates that female managers consciously created a favorable impression to a greater extent than male managers. It is possible that females are more affected than men by the relative desirability of various items on the impression management scale. This reasoning is consistent with previous research that has indicated that women are prone to the influence of norms and values of the society (McGuire, 1968; Phillips and Clancy, 1972). Some research indicates that women are more willing to bring emotional factors to bear while making workplace decisions and also bring different attitudes to the job (Frederick *et al.*, 1991). There is also evidence that men and women may give different desirability rating to different traits (Phillips and

Clancy, 1972). Future research needs to examine this issue in detail.

It is important to note here that the sample consisted of managers of a not-for-profit organization. It is possible that these results may not be generalizable to for-profit organizations. Future research is needed to replicate these findings to other types of organizations, and examine the effect of social desirability bias on other measures of ethical conduct.

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