

Nonverbal Communication in the Employment Interview: Gender Differences in Impression Management Techniques

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The purpose of this literature review is to examine the gender differences in nonverbal communication exhibited in the employment interview and the impacts of these differences on the success of the applicant.

Employment Interview

One of the most popular procedures used in selection processes is the employment/selection interview (Dipboye, 1992). A selection interview is defined by Dipboye as “a dialogue initiated by one or more persons to gather information and evaluate the qualifications of an applicant for employment.” Some researchers choose the term “recruitment interview” to imply that the interview is a “two-way process” (Stewart & Cash, 2003). Organizations are “recruiting” as well as “selecting” future workers and thus should present themselves in a favorable light (Stewart & Cash). While some studies have shown that interviews may provide low validity for determining an applicant’s qualifications and future performance on the job, they are still one of the most widely-used selection instruments (Dipboye). This is because employers want to meet potential employees before making a final decision (Stewart & Cash).

Impression Management

In examining the employment interview, the role of impression management techniques is considered essential to the interview process (Dipboye, 1992). This is because impression management “is concerned explicitly with how people engender positive views of themselves in others while avoiding negative views” (Burgoon, Buller & Woodall, 1996). A social situation like the selection interview is of special interest in the area of impression management because the interviewee, in particular, is under extreme pressure to promote a positive image of him/herself to the interviewer in order to obtain the position (Dipboye). Furthermore, impression management is complicated by the fact that it encompasses conscious or unconscious behaviors and utilizes both verbal and nonverbal techniques (Schlenker, 1980).

It is important to note that impression management is essentially self-projection and may occur whether one is aware of it or not (Schlenker, 1980). Most individuals have been socialized so that they “encode and decode automatically” and are so well-trained that they are able to “[form] impressions of others without even realizing which specific behavior produced [the] response and often using a particular nonverbal action through habit” (Schlenker). Therefore, impression management is at work even if it is not intentional.

There has been much research to try to identify the particular objectives individuals seek in impression management (Burgoon et al., 1996). Some of the broader goals of impression management include creating an image of oneself which one wishes to project, determining how that image will be demonstrated, and defending the image if threatened (Dipboye, 1992). These are accomplished through tactics and strategies by assertive and defensive means (Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984).

As Tedeschi & Melburg (1984) explain, “tactical impression management is undertaken with clear and rather short-term objectives in mind.” The Western Electric study may be used as an example of tactical impression management. In this case, workers increased production regardless of changes made to the working conditions because the workers attempted to please their supervisors and thus obtain “favorable evaluations” (Tedeschi & Melburg). The tactic utilized here was the increased production. This behavior promoted the image of a good worker to obtain the short-term goal of a positive performance evaluation. Strategic impression management focuses on “building reputational characteristics that serve the long-term interests of the individual” such as credibility and trustworthiness (Tedeschi & Melburg). An employee may engage in additional schooling, which aids the image of “well-educated.” This may prove profitable in the long-run, such as a promotion a few years later (Tedeschi & Melburg).

The assertive-defensive realm of impression management is best understood by what Schlenker

describes as “the Association Principle...people attempt to claim...desirable images and disclaim undesirable images” (1980). Assertive impression management techniques are used to “claim” the image that is desired. The individual seeks to “establish a particular identity...and [is] not merely reactive to situational demands” (Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984). He/she is actively pursuing impression management techniques. Wearing a particular outfit or making a statement to impress a supervisor would be illustrations of assertive impression management.

On the contrary, defensive techniques are reactionary and are used in a situation where one is being attributed negative behaviors or characteristics which are associated with an impression they do not want (Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984). Thus, they attempt to “disclaim” that image. An example of this would be an explanation for poor quality work which would help the individual maintain a positive reputation (Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984).

Tedeschi & Melburg organized the assertive-defensive and tactical-strategic dimensions into a 2 x 2 matrix as a representation of the relationships among these aspects of impression management (see Appendix). The matrix presents four different categories: assertive-tactical, assertive-strategic, defensive-tactical, and defensive-strategic, and the goals linked to each category. The assertive-strategic element has been identified as the one most closely associated with nonverbal communication (Burgoon et al., 1996). This aspect of impression management is often used to help one build attraction, esteem, prestige, status, credibility, and/or trustworthiness in another’s eyes (Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984).

Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication is the “unspoken” portion of communication and includes kinesics (body movements, gestures, facial expressions), vocalics (vocal expression), haptics (touch), proxemics (space), chronemics (use of time), physical appearance, and artifacts (the use of objects) (Burgoon et al., 1996). All of these different behaviors contribute to the nonverbal communication in a message and to understanding meaning in a communication setting (Burgoon et al.). In fact, nonverbal communication has been estimated to comprise approximately 60-90% of the meaning

communicated in such a social setting (Burgoon et al.). It is always important to remember that all nonverbal communication occurs in a particular social context, and the meaning may change according to the setting (Schlenker, 1980).

Due to the impact of nonverbal communication in the communication process, many researchers have investigated the relationship between nonverbal communication and an applicant’s success in the employment interview (Gifford, Ng, & Wilkinson, 1985; Parsons & Liden, 1984; Goldberg & Cohen, 2004). One of the early studies performed on this topic suggested that interviewers tend to evaluate interviewees in areas such as social skill based on their nonverbal behavior (Gifford et al.). In addition, nonverbal cues are often used in instances where “information about a person is valuable” and/or “there are reasons to believe that such information can’t or won’t be explicitly expressed verbally or otherwise” (Schlenker, 1980). Social settings such as these would include first dates, a court trial, or the employment interview (Schlenker). Due to the fact that interviewers utilize nonverbal cues in assessing applicants, interviewees should focus on utilizing nonverbal communication cues to enhance their impression management skills.

Interpersonal Nonverbal Cues in Impression Management

Schlenker (1980) discusses two interpersonal dimensions in which people try to portray themselves. These dimensions can assist individuals in determining the impressions that they wish to project. The “power dimension” refers to the “vertical hierarchy that exists in social relationships” (Schlenker). In the power dimension, individuals are superiors through dominance, wealth, or competency/knowledge, or they are inferiors through an attitude of submission, poverty, and incompetency/lack of knowledge (Schlenker). The second “evaluative dimension” refers to the like/dislike of an individual (Schlenker). Therefore, the nonverbal behaviors are categorized “according to the amount of dominance/submission and liking/disliking they express” (Schlenker).

Individuals may use specific nonverbal behaviors to exemplify a dominant impression. For example, an erect posture, an “energy look” (moving in a

quick, purposeful manner), having “steady hands and feet,” lowered eyebrows, and good eye contact are all nonverbal contributors to the personification of dominance (Schlenker, 1980). In addition, dominant people are often given and take more personal space and are the first ones to initiate touch (Schlenker). The paralanguage (or vocalics) of dominant personalities is controlled in such a way as to downplay nervousness and portray confidence, trustworthiness, and honesty (Schlenker). Conversely, submissive nonverbal behaviors would consist of slouching, raised eyebrows (suggesting surprise or fear), and no or little direct eye contact (Schlenker).

In the evaluative dimension, individuals seek to be liked or disliked through their communication. Schlenker (1980) summarizes research which explains types of nonverbal cues used when one wants to be liked. These individuals tend to “show others that they care, are interested in, and like him or her” (Schlenker). This would be accomplished by demonstrating “high immediacy,” which consists of “smaller interpersonal distances,” body orientation that is faced towards the other person, eye contact, and appropriate facial expressions which show that one is listening (Schlenker). Smiling has also been noted to help increase likeability and is the most “easily recognized facial sign when greeting others” (Schlenker).

Other methods for being liked are also used. One might present an image which is believed to already be liked and accepted by the target audience (Schlenker, 1980). For example, an image of “athleticism” might be exhibited by an interviewee who believes the interviewer only hires candidates with whom he can also golf. Some individuals attempt to be “aloof or unconcerned” in an attempt to play “hard to get” (Schlenker). It is important to use caution with this approach because it can seem disrespectful if taken to an extreme (Schlenker).

At times individuals do not seek to be liked (Schlenker, 1980). Examples such as a football coach, military instructor, or bully believe it to be in their best interest to be disliked (Schlenker). While this type of behavior is not always intentionally, it is important to remember that there are those whom would manage this type of impression.

Self-Management

A key to being an effective communicator is the ability to recognize the communication climate. One example of such a setting would be when one is meeting with someone who “is of higher status, competence, or power,” such as their supervisor (Schlenker, 1980). In this situation, “relative submissiveness” is appropriate, even if that is not one’s typical image (Schlenker). Thus, the ability to adapt one’s behavior to a particular setting can be very beneficial. People who recognize the appropriate behavior in a social setting and are able to modify their behavior accordingly are often designated as high “self-monitoring” individuals (Dipboye, 1992). Those with high self-monitoring capabilities tend to appeal more to the interviewer than low self-monitors because they respond with the appropriate verbal and nonverbal communication (Dipboye). Clearly the skill with which one monitors one’s impressions can have important implications in an interview situation.

Gender Differences in Nonverbal Communication

Research has also shown that men and women exhibit different nonverbal communication in normal societal situations. Some of these include: a greater capacity in women to “produce facial expressions that viewers can interpret correctly,” the greater understanding of women to judge what encoders were enacting, and a sensitivity to the feelings and wishes of another and the corresponding ability to respond with appropriate nonverbal communication (LaFrance & Mayo, 1979). If such nonverbal communication differences between men and women are noticeable in daily interactions, then they should be present in other types of social settings as well, for example, the employment interview. Such forms of nonverbal communication may also affect both the images men and women portray and their ability to decode another’s impressions. These differences can influence the impression management techniques and ratings of the interviewers, thereby impacting the success of the applicant.

Preliminary findings have indicated that females have been rated higher on nonverbal communication in an interview setting, therefore demonstrating their effectiveness to communicate in this manner (Parsons & Liden, 1984). In addition, a recent study found

that the stereotyping of gender communication techniques may play a role in the interviewer's evaluations of communication ability (Goldberg & Cohen, 2004). In this instance, there was little difference in ratings for men and women with low or poor nonverbal communication skills, but "men with high nonverbal skills were marked higher than any other group" (Goldberg & Cohen). The researchers of this study attributed these findings to the idea that men were rated higher because they were not expected to have strong nonverbal communication skills, simply because they were men (Goldberg & Cohen). Furthermore, they hypothesized that women with stronger verbal skills would be rated higher as well, because that is not their gender's stereotypical strength (Goldberg & Cohen). Both of these studies demonstrate that the area of gender differences in nonverbal impression management techniques calls for further investigation.

Conclusion

As a Business Administration major with a Human Resources concentration, I anticipate having many opportunities to communicate with potential employees and co-workers. A general understanding of the contribution of nonverbal communication to interpersonal relationships enables an individual to identify the type of impression they want to make, and to align their nonverbal cues accordingly. Recognizing the impressions of others empowers a person to better decode and react to nonverbal input from others. The employment interview is a specific example of a situation in which impression management is often used. Furthermore, the theories and information gleaned from studies of gender differences in nonverbal communication are applicable to daily communication as well.

In a highly competitive business environment, a number of factors can contribute to one's success or failure; clearly some of these factors involve gender differences in nonverbal communication. The employment interview is a defining point in a process leading to a specific outcome: one is either hired or rejected. In such a pivotal situation, it is possible to evaluate the impact of gender nonverbal factors on the impressions created and the final employment decision. There has been little, if any, research linking all four of these areas together (gender

differences in nonverbal impression management techniques operating in the employment interview situation). I believe a compilation of the research conducted in this area will help direct subsequent research into areas that warrant further investigation. Some of these areas of study might include more effective communication between individuals of different genders, better encoding and decoding of one's nonverbal cues, and better evaluation of applicants during an employment interview, all of which would contribute to greater communication in the workplace and better employee selection decisions.

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Appendix

A Classification Scheme for Impression Management Behaviors

	TACTICAL	STRATEGIC
DEFENSIVE	Accounts - excuses, justifications Disclaimers Self-handicapping Apologies Restitution Pro-social Behavior	Alcoholism Drug Abuse Phobias Hypochondria Mental Illness Learned Helplessness
ASSERTIVE	Entitlements Enhancements Ingratiation Intimidation Exemplification Self-promotion Supplication	Attraction Esteem Prestige Status Credibility Trustworthiness

Source: Tedeschi, J.T., & Melburg, V. (1984).