

# Impression Management Theory and Diversity

## Lessons for Organizational Behavior

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The importance of self-presentational concerns may well be culturally relative.

—Roy F. Baumeister

“A Self-Presentational View of Social Phenomena”

Because most work is performed in larger or smaller organizations and requires on-going interactions among the individual worker, co-workers, supervisors, and managers, deep-seated and widespread hostility toward persons with characteristics and qualities that differentiate them from others can assure that any “outsider” so seriously handicapped will fail.

—Eli Ginzberg

Foreword to *Diversity in the Workplace: Human Resources Initiatives*

Organizations have come a long way from those described in William Whyte’s *Organization Man*. Diversity, rather than similarity, has become a reality. Currently, more than half of the workforce in the United States is composed of women, minorities, or immigrants (Kavanagh & Kennedy, 1992). The Hudson Institute’s *Workforce 2000* (Johnston & Packer, 1987) projects that women, minorities, and immigrants will soon make up the majority of new entrants in the U.S. workforce. By the year 2000, it is estimated that only 15% of the new net hires in the U.S. workforce will be White males.

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As the character and composition of the workforce change, there has been increasing interest in issues related to *diversity*.<sup>1</sup> Surveys have indicated that about 40% of U.S. companies currently offer diversity training, and about one quarter of organizations view diversity as a priority (Williams, 1992). Similarly, in another survey (described by Jackson, 1992), about three fourths of 645 firms were concerned about increasing diversity and one third indicated that issues of diversity had affected their corporate strategy.

As a result of these changing demographics, many organizations have instituted diversity training programs that focus on understanding cultural differences and dispelling stereotypes. Some stereotypes are problematic because they are quite disparaging. Moreover, even when stereotypes hold kernels of truth for a group on the whole, they rarely apply to individuals. Thus it is important for individuals working in organizations to go beyond stereotypes and be able to recognize individual characteristics, understand the motivations of others, and adjust behaviors accordingly.

One way to better understand the underlying motives of individuals and organizations is through *impression management theory* (also known as *self-presentation theory*). Researchers within the social, behavioral, management, and organizational sciences have been devoting increased attention to this theoretical framework which revolves around the concerns of individuals for making positive impressions on others (see Giacalone & Rosenfeld, 1989, 1991). *Impression management* refers to the many ways by which individuals attempt to control the impressions others have of them: their behavior, motivations, morality, and a host of personal attributes like dependability, intelligence, and future potential. The impression management perspective assumes that a basic human desire is to be viewed by others in a favorable manner. This would seem to be a particularly strong motive among members of racial/ethnic minority groups, women, and immigrants, who often need to please majority group members in positions of greater power (Rosenfeld, Giacalone, & Riordan, in press).

Understanding how one's impression management behavior might be interpreted by others can also serve as the basis for smoother interactions and a means for solving some of the most insidious communication problems among individuals of different racial/ethnic and gender backgrounds. Indeed, diversity is of interest to organizations, to an extent due to the "uncertainty about how to handle the challenge of communicating with employees whose cultural backgrounds result in differing assumptions, values, and even language skills" (Jackson, 1992, p. 3).

Although women, minorities, and immigrants may perceive the need to modify their impression management behaviors in a workplace that has been traditionally dominated by White males, little systematic research has been performed to understand how issues of diversity and impression management relate to each other and to organizations. Although the organizational impression management literature (e.g., Giacalone & Rosenfeld, 1989, 1991) has been expanding rapidly, "comparatively little research has explored the relationships

between actor attributes such as race, gender, and age and impression management behavior" (Gardner & Martinko, 1988, p. 337). Because the use of impression management in organizations is pervasive and may have important effects on the individual as well as on the organization, researchers must do more to understand the role of impression management in an increasingly diverse workforce.<sup>2</sup> The present issue is an initial attempt to apply impression management theory to gain clearer insights into issues raised by the increasingly diverse nature of society and the workplace.

On a personal level, our own interest in impression management theory dates back to the late 1970s while graduate students in social psychology at the State University of New York at Albany. In the intervening years, as our interests diversified, our orientation has moved from the static world of the social psychology lab to the more chaotic, but challenging, organizational arena. For the past several years, we have been interested in applying impression management theory to the emerging issues of racial, ethnic, gender, and multinational diversity. Through our past work, we identified the need for a single source on issues related to impression management, diversity, and organizations. Sage Publications agreed with our conclusion and invited us to use one of its most interdisciplinary journals, *American Behavioral Scientist*, for this first comprehensive interface of these perspectives.

This special issue brings together five theoretical perspectives and two empirical studies by individuals working in the social and organizational sciences. It demonstrates how impression management can be used as the vehicle for promoting pluralism and more effective social interactions. This special issue of *ABS* presents a unique opportunity to reach social scientists who may not typically read the journals in which impression management articles are published. Also, a better understanding of how impression management is related to diversity is likely to be of great interest to organizational practitioners and equal opportunity/affirmative action specialists who are trying to manage more effectively in increasingly diverse environments. Thus it is our hope that organizational researchers, consultants, managers, and students (and perhaps even our former psychology professors!) will find the articles in this issue as useful and thought provoking as we have.

## NOTES

1. In many organizational settings, the definition of "diversity" has become much broader than just a focus on women and minorities. It now often subsumes issues related to aging, socioeconomic status, physical ability/disability and lifestyle (Williams, 1992).

2. An intriguing sidelight of the diversity-impression management relationship is the degree to which the increased use of the term "diversity" is itself an attempt to project a more positive, inclusive image rather than the negative, divisive connotations associated with terms such as "affirmative action" ("Many White males in New York view affirmative action and equal opportunity as ways to cheat them out of what is rightfully theirs" [Broadnax, 1991-1992, p. 10] or something that has more harmful than helpful consequences [Riordan, 1993]). As Jenkins and Carr (1991-1992)

note, "The concept [of diversity] sometimes is treated or seized upon as the latest buzzword in organizational management. It even appears to be embraced by a few who wish to avoid dealing with 'affirmative action' " (p. 8).

At times, the language used to describe diversity initiatives in organizations has a rapturous quality. In addition to "celebrating" diversity, organizations should "embrace diversity" (Kennedy & Everest, 1991, p. 50), "value diversity" (Broadnax, 1991-1992, p. 10), or make it something to be "nurtured" (Dominquez, 1991-1992, p. 16).

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