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Publisher: Routledge

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Human Performance

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/hhup20>

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Published online: 10 Jan 2014.

To cite this article: Ute-Christine Klehe, Martin Kleinmann, Christiane Nieß & Jessica Grazi (2014) Impression Management Behavior in Assessment Centers: Artificial Behavior or Much Ado About Nothing?, *Human Performance*, 27:1, 1-24, DOI: [10.1080/08959285.2013.854365](https://doi.org/10.1080/08959285.2013.854365)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08959285.2013.854365>

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Impression Management Behavior in Assessment Centers: Artificial Behavior or Much Ado About Nothing?

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Candidates' assertive impression-management (IM) behaviors affect performance ratings during selection interviews, a finding that has caused some concern about selection interviews' objectivity and accuracy. Similar effects have been proposed for assessment centers, yet research on IM in assessments centers is rare and inconclusive. This study uses trait-activation theory (Tett & Guterman, 2000) to predict how assertive IM-behaviors emerge and influence performance ratings during assessments centers. Results showed that candidates' ingratiation behaviors related to observer ratings on the conceptually related AC-dimension cooperation, whereas self-promotion behaviors related to ratings on the dimensions leadership and planning. Furthermore, assertive IM behaviors during the assessment center construct-related validity and correlated significantly with candidates' performance in non-evaluative situations. Consequently, assertive IM behaviors in personnel selection may pose less of a threat than frequently assumed but may partially reflect a behavioral manifestation of candidates' underlying interindividual differences.

Impression management (IM), the process through which people can influence the impressions others hold of them in social interactions (Rosenfeld, Giacalone, & Riordan, 1995), is a great concern in personnel selection. Candidates show IM behaviors during personnel selection, and assertive IM behaviors in particular, that is, behaviors that serve the proactive construction of a positive image. Assertive IM behaviors, in turn, often pay off: During selection interviews, for example, assertive candidates receive better evaluations (Barrick, Shaffer, & DeGrassi,

2009; Ellis, West, Ryan, & DeShon, 2002; Gilmore & Ferris, 1989; Peeters & Lievens, 2006; Stevens & Kristof, 1995). For decision makers, however, IM behaviors thus threaten the selection decision's accuracy (J. Hogan, Barrett, & Hogan, 2007). Anderson (1991), for example, suspected that "impression management by the interviewee . . . represents a potent source of error in interviewer judgments which may or may not be recognized as such" (p. 414). Similar concerns apply to assessment centers (McFarland, Ryan, & Kriska, 2002), yet studies about the occurrence and consequences of IM behaviors during assessment centers are still rare and inconclusive (McFarland, Ryan, & Kriska, 2003; McFarland, Yun, Harold, Viera, & Moore, 2005).

More recently, scholars have suggested that candidates' IM behaviors could also reflect meaningful interindividual dispositions rather than a source of error (Van Iddekinge, McFarland, & Raymark, 2007). Ellis et al. (2002) argued that "both strategies [ingratiation and self-promotion], when true reflections of the applicant, are valuable input to the interviewer's decision" and "specific IM strategies may be criterion related for certain jobs" (p. 1206). Also, Stevens and Kristof (1995) noted that

many jobs require some ability to work effectively with others or the public. Conceivably, this ability may entail skilful management of others' impressions (e.g., fostering liking and cohesion in work groups and convincing clients of one's competence and professionalism). Therefore, applicants' impression management success also may predict their future performance for these jobs. (p. 603)

The current study contributes to this debate in several ways: Deriving its predictions from trait-activation theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003; Tett & Guterman, 2000), it tests, first, for the generalizability of the findings just presented from the interview domain to assessment centers, given that past findings about IM behaviors in assessment centers have been scarce and inconclusive (McFarland, Ryan, & Kriska, 2003; McFarland, Yun, Harold, Viera, & Moore, 2005). Second, it tests whether the effects of candidates' assertive IM behaviors will differ depending on the specific IM and performance dimensions observed, thus suggesting more refined conclusions about the link between IM behaviors and performance ratings. Third, the study addresses the internal construct-related validity of assertive IM behaviors during an assessment center. This is relevant given that the internal construct-related validity of the targeted performance dimensions in assessment centers is often questionable (Bowler & Woehr, 2006; Klimoski & Brickner, 1987), yet assessment centers remain valid predictors of performance on the job (Gaugler, Rosenthal, Thornton, & Benson, 1987). Fourth, it tests how the assertive IM behaviors shown during an assessment center relate to candidates' performance in comparable but nonevaluative performance situations, thus addressing the core concern underlying the study of IM during personnel selection. If candidates' assertive IM behaviors were indeed induced by the selection situation's evaluative nature and were solely aimed at enhancing evaluations, then they should fail to relate to performance during nonevaluative situations and would indeed pose a threat to the selection procedure's validity (Anderson, 1991; McFarland et al., 2002). Alternatively, if these behaviors were a behavioral manifestation of relevant candidate traits, then they should also relate to performance in nonevaluative situations, thus alleviating at least some fears about candidates' IM behaviors during personnel selection.

IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

Candidates' IM behaviors are usually divided into assertive behaviors (i.e., behaviors aimed at creating a favorable impression with another person) and defensive IM behaviors (i.e., behaviors aimed at protecting one's image), with assertive behaviors usually being much more relevant in the context of personnel selection (Ellis et al., 2002; Gilmore & Ferris, 1989). Assertive behaviors can focus on either the other person, as is the case with ingratiation, or the self, as is the case with self-promotion (Proost, Schreurs, De Witte, & Derous, 2010). Ingratiation and self-promotion are the IM patterns most frequently observed during personnel selection (e.g., Gordon, 1996; Proost et al., 2010; Stevens & Kristof, 1995) and Jones and Pittman (1982) saw them as especially relevant for interpersonal interactions in organizations. Ingratiation fosters interpersonal liking (e.g., by expressing gratitude toward others, stressing similarity between oneself and the other, and praising the other). Self-promotion is about looking competent by stressing one's extraordinary experiences, highlighting one's qualities, and pointing out one's accomplishments.

TRAIT-ACTIVATION THEORY

In line with trait-activation theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003; Tett & Guterman, 2000), assertive IM will be especially prominent during personnel selection, as most candidates want to leave a favorable impression with the possible employer (Bolino, Kacmar, Turnley, & Gilstrap, 2008). Trait-activation is rooted in the person-situation interactionist approach. It defines traits as "intraindividual consistencies and interindividual uniquenesses" in tendencies "to behave in identifiable ways in light of situational demands" (Tett & Guterman, 2000, p. 398). Trait-activation theory proposes that these traits express themselves in observable behaviors only as soon as they are being activated by a situation's trait-relevant cues. Thus, rather than expecting a person to translate his or her traits into behavior across situations, the theory assumes that the expression of the person's traits will also depend on whether the situation is trait relevant. That is, if it offers organizational, social, or task-related cues that may—or may not—trigger the trait-related behavior, depending on the person's standing on the trait. Trait relevant situations thus allow people to show the behavioral patterns associated with the particular trait.

Tett and Burnett (2003) further extended this model. They argued that the resulting trait-related behavior may (or may not) imply a better evaluation of performance. In more detail, such evaluation would depend on the fit between the behavior shown and the same organizational, social, and task-related criteria that already cued the person's trait-related behaviors in the first place. Finally, performance is usually related to some extrinsic rewards, which (together with intrinsic rewards resulting from a proposed match between one's traits and the behavior shown) in turn enhance the likelihood of further trait-related behavior.

IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT BEHAVIORS IN ASSESSMENT CENTERS

Applied to candidates' assertive IM behaviors, that is, when assuming that IM behaviors represent underlying traits, trait-activation theory implies that situations vary in terms of providing

IM-relevant cues, which in turn influence the degree to which candidates show trait-IM-related behaviors. Assessment centers likely offer many cues for assertive IM behaviors, given that candidates usually undergo the assessment center in pursuit of a valued outcome (e.g., a job, but also an affirmation of one's own worth and suitability), the attainment of which depends on the positive evaluation by public assessors. The trait-activation potential for assertive IM behaviors is thus probably high during an assessment center, leading to a general increase in candidates' assertive IM behavior compared to their behavior in otherwise comparable but nonevaluative situations. This way, trait activation actually concurs with the frequent but as of yet untested assumption that candidates will show more assertive IM behaviors during an assessment center than they would do in a comparable yet nonevaluative situation. Therefore, we propose the following:

- H1: Candidates show more (a) ingratiation and (b) self-promotion behaviors during an assessment center than during otherwise comparable but nonevaluative situations.

CONSISTENCY OF IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT BEHAVIORS

A possible conclusion of results supporting H1 might be to deject candidates' assertive IM behaviors as a threat to the accuracy of hiring decisions (e.g., Anderson, 1991). Yet, as just outlined, the finding of more assertive IM behaviors during an assessment center than during otherwise comparable but nonevaluative situations does stand in line with trait-activation theory and, more particularly, with the assumption that candidates' assertive IM behaviors are behavioral manifestations of their underlying traits (Peeters & Lievens, 2006). Past research has, after all, argued that these behaviors had a dispositional component related to candidates' personality (Van Iddekinge et al., 2007). If this is true, then candidates' assertive IM behaviors should also reflect a behavioral pattern specific to the particular person (Kleinmann & Klehe, 2011) and should, once triggered, show internal construct validity.

This proposition can again be derived from trait-activation theory (Tett & Guterman, 2000). Trait-activation theory, after all, asserts that behavior is a function of the trait-relevant cues in the situation (Tett & Guterman, 2000). Thus, conceptualizing candidates' ingratiation and self-promotion behaviors as behavioral expressions of underlying traits does not imply that a person behaves according to these traits in every situation that he or she encounters, but rather that the IM behaviors shown also depend on the IM-activation potential of the situation. As candidates could encounter such cues for assertive IM behaviors during an assessment center, these assessment center situations will likely trigger candidates' relevant traits, leading to high correlations of the same assertive IM behaviors as observed during different assessment center exercises (high convergent validity), whereas correlations between different IM behaviors observed within the same assessment center exercise should be relatively low (high discriminant validity). Thus we propose the following:

- H2: Candidates' assertive IM behaviors during an assessment center show internal construct-related validity.

IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT AND PERFORMANCE RATINGS IN ASSESSMENT CENTERS

The prime reason that assertive IM behaviors are often considered to be a concern during personnel selection is not only the assumption that candidates arguably show more of them during the selection situation than during nonevaluative situations but further that assessors allow these assertive IM behaviors to influence their ratings of candidates' performance (e.g., McFarland et al., 2005). Particularly field studies in the context of structured and unstructured selection interviews have shown that candidates' self- as well as other-focused IM behaviors enhance interviewer ratings regardless of candidates' credentials (Ellis et al., 2002; Gilmore & Ferris, 1989; Peeters & Lievens, 2006; Stevens & Kristof, 1995; see also Barrick et al., 2009). Research on candidates' IM behaviors during other selection procedures, such as assessment centers, is rare and inconclusive. Although McFarland et al. (2003) found no link between candidates' IM behaviors and assessor-ratings of performance in a role-play, another study did find such an effect for role-plays and a mock presentation (McFarland et al., 2005). Given that most research from the interview domain suggests a positive relationship between candidates' assertive IM behaviors and their performance ratings (e.g., Barrick et al., 2009), we also propose the following:

H3: Candidates' levels of (a) ingratiation and (b) self-promotion behaviors are positively related to assessor ratings of candidates' performance in an assessment center.

The above hypothesis suggests that assertive IM behaviors in general are related to overall increased performance ratings (Barrick et al., 2009; McFarland et al., 2005). Yet the effects of ingratiation and self-promotion may well differ.

In their explanation of trait-activation theory, Tett and Burnett (2003) referred back to the work of R. Hogan (1991), who tried to explain the mechanisms via which specific traits are related to subsequent performance. More specifically, R. Hogan (1991, 1996) suggested social situations to prompt two types of social strivings: "getting along," a person's striving for acceptance and approval, for example, by seeming particularly likeable (see also Ferris & Judge, 1991; Stevens & Kristof, 1995), and "getting ahead," a striving for status, power, and control, for example, by looking particularly competent. J. Hogan and Holland (2003) used this distinction for making refined predictions about the relationship between personality and distinct job performance criteria, yet the same logic should apply to the two behavioral patterns of ingratiation and self-promotion. Thus, both ingratiation and self-promotion likely enhance performance ratings overall, however, they likely do so via greatly different paths, responding to different situational cues and resulting in diverging effects on performance ratings on different dimensions.

Performance dimensions observed in assessment centers can largely be divided into three groups: "feeling," "power," and "thinking" (Kolk, Born, & van der Flier, 2004). Feeling (also called "soft" dimensions or "trust"; Yukl, 1998; Zand, 1997) describes dimensions related to sensitivity and empathy, affiliation, and cooperation, thus reflecting the notion of "getting along." Power (see Yukl, 1998; Zand, 1997) describes dimensions related to persuasiveness, assertiveness, and decisiveness, dimensions associated with taking charge and control of the situation and seeking out leadership, and thus reflects the notion of "getting ahead." Finally, thinking (also called "rational" or "knowledge" dimensions; Yukl, 1998; Zand, 1997) describes analytical skills, planning, organizing, and judgment, and thus a notion of competence and control of the situation.

Although less interpersonal in nature than power, thinking, too, indicates a level of mastery or control—not of people, but of situational demands.

Trait-activation theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003) proposes that just as much as situational cues serve for trait activation, they may also serve as reference points for evaluation. Thus, the same behavior may or may not be deemed suitable for good performance, depending on the match between the behavior in question and the demand implied in that performance domain. Consequently, as we discuss in more detail next, we expect that ingratiation behaviors will be primarily related to evaluations on the dimension “feeling” as assessed via candidates’ cooperative behaviors, and self-promotion behaviors will be primarily related to evaluations on the dimension “power” as assessed via candidates’ emergent leadership, and to evaluations on the dimension “thinking” as assessed via candidates’ planning.

Ingratiation

Ingratiation implies stressing similarities between the candidate and the target (Chen, Lee, & Yeh, 2008; Higgins & Judge, 2004) and we assume that ingratiation fosters candidates’ ratings on “feeling” dimensions such as cooperation (Kolk et al., 2004). Via ingratiation, candidates make themselves likable and show that they value their group members, behaviors that have been found to improve exchange relationships in groups (Strutton & Pelton, 1998). Rosenfeld et al. (1995) suggested that ingratiation fosters harmony within a group and facilitate decision making, both aspects of successful cooperation within the group. Also Nguyen, Seers, and Hartman (2008) viewed ingratiation as a means of facilitating social interaction, arguing that ingratiation acts as a catalyst that eases group members’ path to establishing a cooperative environment.

Self-Promotion

Self-promotion implies showing that one holds the expert power, skills, and abilities needed for mastering the job (McFarland et al., 2003). Thus, self-promotion should primarily foster ratings on criteria related to “getting ahead” or power. In the context of assessment centers, power is often measured via candidates’ performance on the dimension leadership, which usually implies emergent leadership. Emergent leaders are not formally assigned a leadership role but exert influence through the support of others (De Souza & Klein, 1995) and leader emergence can easily be observed in multiplayer assessment center exercises such as group discussions or role-plays.

Relevant for emergent leadership are other group members’ perceptions of the leader. Theory and findings converge to show that when someone possesses and expresses the traits of a prototypical leader, then that person will likely emerge as a leader in the group (De Souza & Klein, 1995; Lord & Maher, 1991). Likely, this person will also gain positive evaluations about his or her leadership. Two core traits associated with leader emergence are dominance (Gough, 1990; Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002; Morrow & Stern, 1990) and self-efficacy (Chemers, Watson, & May, 2000; Smith & Foti, 1998). By stressing their qualities, experiences, and accomplishments, candidates using self-promotion articulate their self-efficacy, thus making themselves look capable of taking the leadership role, and stress their own dominance, thus also highlighting their motivation to take on this role.

Self-promotion may also benefit participants in appearing suitable in the less social but more cognitive “thinking” domain, insofar as candidates can show self-promotion in order to look particularly rational or knowledgeable and like someone who approaches tasks in a purposeful, planned, and structured manner. Not only can appearing planful and in control support candidates’ claim to power (R. Hogan, 1991, 1996), but planning and organizing represent one of the most salient competencies of managerial roles (e.g., Borman & Brush, 1993). In summary, we thus propose the following:

- H4a: Candidates’ level of ingratiation behaviors is positively related to assessor ratings of candidates’ performance on the dimension cooperation in an assessment center.
- H4b: Candidates’ level of self-promotion behaviors is positively related to assessor ratings of their performance on the dimension leadership in an assessment center.
- H4c: Candidates’ level of self-promotion behaviors is positively related to assessor ratings of their performance on the dimension planning in an assessment center.

IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT AND PERFORMANCE DURING NON-EVALUATIVE SITUATIONS

If the aforementioned arguments based on trait activation hold true, then candidates’ assertive IM behaviors may even contribute to assessment centers’ ability to predict candidates’ performance under less evaluative conditions. After all, past research has repeatedly found that although candidates’ performance in assessment centers predicts their success on the job (Gaugler et al., 1987), Assessment Centers’ internal construct-related validity on the dimensions officially targeted is surprisingly low (Bowler & Woehr, 2006). Yet, if assessment centers do not fully measure the performance dimensions they intend to measure but still predict performance, then other factors also contribute to their predictive validity.

Candidates’ assertive IM behaviors, we argued, may well show construct related validity (H2) and foster their performance ratings on specific dimensions (H4). As most jobs require people to work effectively with others, providing the chance for IM behaviors outside of the selection context (Stevens & Kristof, 1995), the IM behaviors observed during an assessment center may even relate to performance under nonevaluative conditions. Thus, if candidates’ assertive IM behaviors indeed represent part of their personality that will be more or less activated in different situations (Tett & Guterman, 2000), then this behavior pattern would also impact the behavior shown during other social—albeit possibly less evaluative—situations (see also Ellis et al., 2002, for a similar idea).

Some indirect support for this notion stems from research showing that assertive IM behaviors improve performance ratings during selection (Barrick et al., 2009) and that these ratings, in turn, predict job performance (McDaniel, Whetzel, Schmidt, & Maurer, 1994). Van Iddekinge et al. (2007) concluded that the IM behaviors shown during selection may even predict job performance, and Kleinmann and Klehe (2011) argued that behaviors that help in a selection context should also be effective in jobs that require similar skills. If candidates’ assertive IM behaviors in selection situations indeed relate to their performance in nonevaluative situations, after controlling for their performance on the respective dimension during the assessment center, of

course, then assertive IM behaviors observed in personnel selection may pose less of a threat than traditionally assumed. Thus, we propose the following:

- H5a: Candidates' ingratiation behaviors in an assessment center relate positively to their performance on the dimension cooperation in comparable but nonevaluative situations.
- H5b: Candidates' self-promotion behaviors in an assessment center relate positively to their performance on the dimension leadership in comparable but nonevaluative situations.
- H5c: Candidates' self-promotion behaviors in an assessment center relate positively to their performance on the dimension planning in comparable but nonevaluative situations.

In summary, this study employs trait-activation theory to combine two previously conflicting viewpoints concerning candidates' assertive IM behaviors in assessment centers: On one hand, it follows up on long-standing concerns in the personnel selection literature by testing whether candidates actually show more assertive IM behaviors during assessment centers than during comparable nonevaluative situations and whether these behaviors influence candidates' performance ratings during the assessment center. On the other hand, the study challenges the notion that candidates' assertive IM behaviors should thus be regarded as a threat to the accuracy of the selection decision by testing for the internal construct-related validity as well as the degree to which assertive behaviors during an assessment center were able to explain incremental variance in candidates' performance during comparable but nonevaluative situations, after controlling for candidates' observed performance on the same dimensions during the assessment center.

METHODS

Setting and Sample

This study was run in the context of an application training program offered to social-science graduate students who were currently applying for a job or would soon do so. Among the 115 participants (73 women, 42 men), 30% studied business administration, 14% in political sciences, 12% in psychology, 11% in law, 23% in other social sciences, and 9% natural sciences. Participants (average age = 27.8; $SD = 5.37$) had, on average, studied for 4.88 years ($SD = 2.59$), with 85% nearing graduation from their master's program or having recently graduated.

Besides reflecting a thoroughly validated research paradigm (Klehe, König, Richter, Kleinmann, & Melchers, 2008; Kleinmann, 1993; König, Melchers, Kleinmann, Richter, & Klehe, 2007), we chose the setting of an application training program for three reasons: First, we needed our sample to be motivated to do well in the assessment center. This excludes pure laboratory studies and concurrent organizational samples (Jennings, 1953). Participants chose to attend the assessment center as an in-depth training to prepare them for similar selection procedures in organizations. To ensure that only motivated candidates participated, participants had to pay a small fee and had to prepare and submit application materials for the target position prior to admission to the assessment center. As is common for application training programs such as the current one (Kleinmann, 1993; König et al., 2007), participants reported perceiving the simulation as very realistic and as motivating to present oneself at one's best, just as one would also do during an actual selection procedure.

Second, concerns about internal validity required the comparable assessment of candidates' performance and assertive IM behaviors in conceptually parallel yet apparently unobserved situations, which would have been difficult to do with true job incumbents and unethical to do during actual personnel selection. The current setting allowed us to conduct the assessment center under standardized yet ecologically valid applicant conditions and to assess participants' assertive IM behaviors on clearly defined preestablished dimensions throughout.

Finally, the paradigm allowed us to recruit participants with comparable knowledge about the target organization (Depolo, Fraccaroli, & Sarchielli, 1994; Louis, 1980). In preparation for the one-day assessment center, participants received a fictitious job advertisement for a trainee position, broadly positioned in a management context to make it both realistic and attractive for prospective university graduates from various academic disciplines.

During each assessment center, 10 to 12 participants took part in three classic assessment exercises in which they were observed by trained observers. They further participated in two more exercises with no observers in the room or any other apparent form of observation, resembling comparable but nonevaluative situations. In those situations, participants were secretly videotaped. After the study, participants received feedback on their performance during the overtly observed assessment center exercises and were debriefed.

Observers

To prevent rating contamination, the study relied on four independent groups of observers selected from graduate students specializing in applied social and/or work and organizational psychology. In all groups, sets of two observers rated independently from each other the behaviors to be assessed. The first dyad of observers rated participants' behavior on the dimensions the assessment center had been developed to assess (leadership, cooperation, planning). The second dyad rated participants' assertive IM behaviors during the assessment center. Comparably, the third dyad rated participants' performance as the fourth dyad rated participants' assertive IM behaviors during the parallel but nonevaluative situations.

Before observing and rating participants, observers underwent one of four distinct 1-day training sessions tailored to their particular task. During these training sessions, observers learned about the respective performance situations (either the assessment center exercises or the parallel but nonevaluative situations) and about the dimensions to be observed (either the performance or the IM dimensions). Observers learned only about their own dimensions and not about the dimensions observed in the other groups, and only about their own condition (assessment center vs. nonevaluative) and not about the other condition. The training employed a frame-of-reference logic (Lievens, 2001) and aimed to achieve a homogeneous understanding of the rating scales and anchors among observers. Observers also received information about typical rating errors. As observers and participants did not receive information about the study's objectives or about any of the ratings provided by any of the other groups involved, this study was double blind.

Performance dimensions. Assessors tend to reduce the performance dimensions rated within assessment centers to a manageable number of categories (Shore, Thornton, & Shore, 1990). Kolk et al. (2004) summarized this into a threefold taxonomy of power, feeling, and thinking, which in the current study were operationalized via the dimensions leadership, cooperation, and planning. These dimensions had also emerged as particularly relevant and conceptually

independent in earlier analyses (Klehe et al., 2008; König et al., 2007; Melchers et al., 2009). Leadership was defined as striving for and assuming responsibility for tasks and groups, coordination of teams, and arguing for one's point of view in groups, whereas cooperation was defined as assisting others in the face of problems, considering the needs of others, being prepared to compromise with others, and mediating between diverging points of view. Planning was described as prioritizing tasks, making plans for tasks and projects, making appointments in due time, and allocating tasks. We used an observation sheet validated in previous studies (Klehe et al., 2008): This sheet provided behavioral examples for each of the same three performance dimensions and asked observers to take detailed notes about their observations during the performance simulation. Finally, observers rated candidates' performance on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*weak performance*) to 5 (*strong performance*) for each dimension. The final score per performance dimension was averaged between the two observers; the average interrater reliability between observers (averaged across the three dimensions assessed in three exercises) was .84.

Assertive IM behaviors. IM observers focused on participants' ingratiation and self-promotion behaviors. Ingratiation was defined as expressing gratitude, praising the other and as stressing similarities between oneself and the other. Self-promotion was defined as stressing one's extraordinary experiences, highlighting one's qualities, and pointing out one's accomplishments. The most common method to measure IM behaviors during personnel selection (e.g., Ellis et al., 2002; Peeters & Lievens, 2006; Stevens & Kristof, 1995) is via tapes or transcripts that observers analyze as many times as needed in order to arrive at definite conclusions. Judging from the interrater agreement (e.g., .87 in Ellis et al., 2002), this procedure renders an accurate estimate of candidates' IM behaviors. In the current study, we also relied on videotapes for the coding of candidates' assertive IM behaviors during the nonevaluative situation but followed Kleinmann and Klehe (2011), who suggested a slightly modified procedure that more closely reflects the actual assessment situation and runs more parallel to the assessment of the targeted performance dimensions. The logical reason why assertive IM behaviors should influence observers' ratings is that observers—consciously or unconsciously—perceive candidates' assertive IM behaviors during the assessed situation. If the time available for observing, detecting, and coding such behaviors is considerably longer due to repeating tapes or transcripts, then observers have more opportunity to detect assertive IM behaviors than actual observer would have in an “online” situation.

The observation sheet used under both conditions had been validated in previous studies (Kleinmann & Klehe, 2011): Except for the different content of the dimensions observed, this observation sheet's structure was parallel to the observation sheet employed for observing candidates' performance on the targeted dimensions. It named the assertive IM dimensions to be observed, listed prototypical behaviors per dimension and asked observers to keep track of and to take detailed notes about these behaviors during the exercise on which to base their final rating on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*weak IM behavior*) to 5 (*strong IM behavior*). The final score per dimension was averaged between the two observers. The average interrater reliability between observers (averaged across the two assertive IM dimensions assessed in three exercises) was .81 for ingratiation and .85 for self-promotion, and thus was quite comparable to the interrater agreements reported in earlier research (e.g., Ellis et al., 2002).

Procedure

In total, participants underwent five distinct situations, three of which were obviously observed and evaluated whereas two were similar in nature but ostensibly nonobserved. The order of situations was randomized across participants and all situations had been developed and tested in previous studies (Kleinmann, 1993; König et al., 2007). The three situations run under traditional assessment center conditions were two group discussions, one with assigned roles and one without, and one role-play between a participant and a trained role-player. In both group discussions, participants had to adopt the role of a governing board in an organization that was in need of taking a set of business decisions. The difference between the group discussions was that information was spread out either between participants or over time. In the group discussion with assigned roles, participants held different types of information that needed to be recognized and combined for a beneficial solution. In the group discussion without assigned roles, participants had to agree on numerous decisions (e.g., whether and how to change the production, human resources, logistics, and marketing of their company's products). This information, entered into a mathematical system, influenced the subsequent status of their organization, thus providing participants with new incoming information to use in order to take the next rounds of decisions. In the role-play, candidates had to find a suitable solution to handle a demanding yet economically threatened customer.

The ostensibly nonevaluative situations were a group discussion without assigned roles and another role-play between two participants. In this group discussion, participants needed to set up a planning of events while being overrun with information. The role-play mimed the negotiation between two colleagues who both needed each other's collaboration while also following diverging and at points mutually exclusive objectives.

During the assessment center situations, two observers per participant rated candidates' performance, whereas two other observers per participant rated candidates' assertive IM behaviors. In the ostensibly nonevaluative situations, no observers were present in the room. Participants were, however, secretly videotaped by a video camera hidden within a ring binder. To ensure comparability, the camera looked at participants from about the same angle as had observers during the evaluative assessment center exercises. Two observers later rated participants' assertive IM behaviors on the basis of these videotapes and two other observers rated participants' performance. To ensure comparability in evaluative procedure between the ostensibly evaluative assessment center situations and the ostensibly nonevaluative situations, these latter observers rated candidates' performance and impression management under conditions as parallel as possible to the original assessment center observers. Equipped with a large-enough screen to catch the same type of details as might be observed in a real-life setting, these observers, too, were asked to focus on the candidates' behaviors and take notes simultaneously, as each video was being played to them only once.

Manipulation check. To test whether participants had truly experienced the ostensibly nonevaluative situations as less evaluative than the official assessment center situations, we checked for participants' experiences after both the last officially observed and the last ostensibly nonevaluative situation via the Evaluation subscale from the Typical-Maximum Performance Scale (Klehe & Anderson, 2005). This subscale, which has been validated on several samples, consists of the three items: "It was obvious to me that my performance was being evaluated"; "I

didn't think that I was being evaluated" (reverse coded); and "my performance was clearly being monitored," rated on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

RESULTS

Descriptives and Manipulation Check

Table 1 includes the overall means, the standard deviations, and the intercorrelations among the studied variables. Table 2 shows those values separately for each exercise. Ninety percent of the participants said that they behaved the same way during the simulated selection situations as they would have in an actual selection context. Furthermore, the manipulation check showed that participants generally perceived the official assessment center situation as highly evaluative ($M = 4.56$, $SD = .67$), whereas the same was not true for the ostensibly nonevaluative situation ($M = 2.03$, $SD = 1.06$), $t(114) = 21.41$, $p < .01$, suggesting that people did not feel particularly evaluated during that situation.

H1. H1 predicted more assertive IM behaviors during the assessment center than during comparable nonevaluative situations. A paired-samples t test indeed showed that candidates showed significantly more ingratiation ($M = 3.47$, $SD = .62$) and self-promotion ($M = 3.55$, $SD = .68$) in the selection situations than in the comparable nonevaluative situations, $t(114) = 7.20$, $p < .01$ ($M = 2.99$, $SD = .51$), for ingratiation and $t(114) = 7.63$, $p < .01$ ($M = 2.72$, $SD = .58$), for self-promotion), thus supporting H1.

H2. H2 proposed that candidates' assertive IM behaviors during the assessment center had internal construct-related validity, whereas research has repeatedly questioned the internal construct-related validity of the performance dimensions targeted in assessment centers (Bowler & Woehr, 2006; Klimoski & Brickner, 1987). Multitrait-multimethod (Campbell & Fiske, 1959; Table 3) analyses indeed suggested that the convergent validity of the performance dimensions originally targeted (correlations between ratings of identical dimensions across different assessment center exercises; average $r_{MTMM} = .43$ using an r -to- Z transformation) was not larger but, if anything, smaller than the discriminant validity (correlations between ratings of different dimensions in identical assessment center exercises; average $r_{HTMM} = .48$ using an r -to- Z transformation), thus contradicting the basic requirement for construct related validity (Campbell & Fiske, 1959).

When running the same type of analysis with the two assertive IM dimensions ingratiation and self-promotion as two different traits and the three Assessment Center exercises (Group Discussion 1, Group Discussion 2, and role-play) as different methods (Table 4), results indicated that the convergent validity of the IM dimensions (average $r_{MTHM} = .50$ using an r -to- Z transformation) was indeed somewhat higher than the discriminant validity coefficient (average $r_{HTMM} = .44$ using an r -to- Z transformation), supporting H2.

In addition, we compared different types of confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) with one another. CFAs allow comparisons between multiple latent models that could describe candidates' assertive IM behaviors. Like earlier research (Klehe et al., 2008; Van Iddekinge, Raymark,

TABLE 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations Among the Studied Variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Impression management during assessment center													
1 Ingratiation	3.47	.62											
2 Self-promotion	3.55	.68	.46**										
Performance during assessment center													
3 Cooperation	3.29	.75	.37**	.27**									
4 Leadership	3.19	.80	.12	.69**	.28**								
5 Planning	3.34	.71	.12	.50**	.52**	.71**							
6 Overall performance	3.32	.58	.27**	.61**	.74**	.80**	.90**						
Impression management during nonevaluative situations													
7 Ingratiation	2.99	.51	.19*	-.01	.15	-.00	.06	.10					
8 Self-promotion	2.72	.58	-.09	.24*	.01	.29**	.22*	.21*	.06				
Performance during nonevaluative situations													
9 Cooperation	3.05	.56	.31**	.24**	.37**	.15	.22*	.31**	.40**	.11			
10 Leadership	2.84	.67	.12	.31**	.17	.33**	.26**	.30**	.17	.67**	.38**		
11 Planning	2.90	.61	.23*	.39**	.31**	.37**	.38**	.42**	.34**	.40**	.63**	.70**	
12 Overall performance	2.94	.51	.26**	.41**	.34**	.37**	.35**	.43**	.35**	.52**	.74**	.86**	.89**

Note. $N = 115$.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

TABLE 2
Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations Among Studied Variables

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
Assessment center Group Discussion 1							
Impression management							
1 Ingratiation	3.48	.72	.84				
2 Self-promotion	3.42	.88	.44*	.91			
Performance							
3 Cooperation	3.22	1.02	.23*	.26**	.76		
4 Leadership	3.09	.93	.16	.65**	.29**	.87	
5 Planning	3.19	.85	.13	.45**	.44**	.55**	.78
Assessment center Group Discussion 2							
Impression management							
1 Ingratiation	3.44	.72	.84				
2 Self-promotion	3.60	.78	.39**	.87			
Performance							
3 Cooperation	3.08	1.21	.35**	.32**	.76		
4 Leadership	3.10	1.10	.21*	.65**	.42**	.89	
5 Planning	3.41	.92	.17	.49**	.51**	.69**	.87
Assessment center role-play							
Impression management							
1 Ingratiation	3.50	.87	.87				
2 Self-promotion	3.64	.82	.47**	.92			
Performance							
3 Cooperation	3.57	.97	.40**	.21*	.88		
4 Leadership	3.37	.85	.03	.58**	.15	.88	
5 Planning	3.40	.85	.09	.41**	.49**	.66**	.88
Nonevaluative group discussion							
Impression management							
1 Ingratiation	2.94	.55	.80				
2 Self-promotion	2.78	.60	.07	.84			
Performance							
3 Cooperation	2.94	.55	.61**	.00	.84		
4 Leadership	2.91	.60	.07	.72**	-.02	.89	
5 Planning	2.83	.62	.40**	.42**	.48**	.53**	.87
Nonevaluative role-play							
Impression management							
1 Ingratiation	3.05	.53	.68				
2 Self-promotion	2.72	.62	.05	.71			
Performance							
3 Cooperation	3.18	.61	.29**	.07	.71		
4 Leadership	2.89	.79	.22*	.65**	.45**	.82	
5 Planning	3.02	.69	.26**	.46**	.62**	.83**	.76

Note. $N = 115$. Interrater reliabilities are in the diagonal.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

TABLE 3
Multitrait–Multimethod Matrix for Performance in Selection Situations

Dimensions	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Group Discussion 1										
1 Planning	3.19	.85								
2 Leadership	3.09	.93	<u>.55**</u>							
3 Cooperation	3.22	1.02	<u>.44**</u>	<u>.29**</u>						
Group Discussion 2										
4 Planning	3.41	.92	.54**	.44**	.28**					
5 Leadership	3.10	1.10	.47**	.65**	.26**	<u>.69**</u>				
6 Cooperation	3.08	1.21	.25**	.17	.41**	<u>.51**</u>	<u>.42**</u>			
Role-play										
7 Planning	3.40	.85	.39**	.27**	.21*	.50**	.35**	.24*		
8 Leadership	3.37	.85	.44**	.46**	.12	.46**	.52**	.15	<u>.66**</u>	
9 Cooperation	3.57	.97	.14	−.06	.15	.10	−.09	.16	<u>.49**</u>	<u>.15</u>

Note. N = 115. Monotrait–heteromethod values (representing convergent validity) are bold; heterotrait–monomethod values (representing discriminant validity) are underlined.
*p < .05. **p < .01.

TABLE 4
Multitrait–Multimethod Matrix for Candidates’ Assertive Impression Management Behaviors

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Assessment Center											
Group Discussion 1											
1. Ingratiation	3.48	.71									
2. Self-promotion	3.41	.88	<u>.439**</u>								
Group Discussion 2											
3. Ingratiation	3.44	.72	.483**	.244**							
4. Self-promotion	3.60	.78	.239*	.662**	<u>.393**</u>						
Role-play											
5. Ingratiation	3.50	.87	.375**	.160	.539**	.208*					
6. Self-promotion	3.63	.82	.227*	.366**	.377**	.511**	<u>.473**</u>				
Nonevaluative situations											
Group discussion											
7. Ingratiation	3.05	.53	.128	.073	.184*	−.056	.092	−.002			
8. Self-promotion	2.72	.62	−.170	.097	−.095	.151	−.038	.071	<u>.050</u>		
Role-play											
9. Ingratiation	2.94	.55	.133	−.075	.211*	.015	.200*	.091	.048	−.126	
10. Self-promotion	2.78	.60	−.083	.084	−.104	.231*	−.052	.155	.034	.071	<u>.068</u>

Note. N = 115. Monotrait–heteromethod values are bold; heterotrait–monomethod values are underlined.
*p < .05. **p < .01.

Eidson, & Attenweiler, 2004), we used two types of CFA models to test the IM behaviors' construct validity, namely, (a) a set of models that assume correlated traits and correlated methods (CTCM) and (b) a set of models that require no separate method factors but rather infer method effects from correlated uniquenesses within methods (CTCU).

Both approaches served to test three different models (Byrne, 1994): Within the CTCM approach, the first model (Model 1a) contained only three methods (i.e., exercises) and no trait (i.e., IM dimension) factors, thus abandoning the notion of dimensions. Model 2a included the same three methods factors and one general trait, representing the idea that the assessment center could not distinguish between different assertive IM dimensions. Model 3a is the traditional CTCM model with two IM dimensions and three method factors.

Within the CTCU approach, Model 1b allowed only correlated errors (correlated uniquenesses) within methods. Model 2b added one general trait factor, and Model 3b included both IM dimensions instead of only one. As outlined by Byrne (1994), a significant difference in fit between Models 3 and 1 proves the assessment center's convergent validity for assertive IM dimensions, and a significant difference in fit between Models 3 and 2 demonstrates the assessment center's discriminant validity for assertive IM dimensions.

We tested the proposed models with AMOS 5 (Arbuckle, 2003), using the covariance matrix as the input for the program. Using chi-square statistics, the comparative fit index, the Tucker–Lewis index, the incremental fit index, the root mean square error of approximation, and the standardized root mean square residual to assess the fit of the models (Hu & Bentler, 1999), both analyses revealed that Model 3, proposing the two dimensions ingratiation and self-promotion besides the exercise-factors (CTCM) or correlated uniquenesses (CTCU), yielded an excellent fit that was significantly better than that of Model 1, which only assumed exercise factors or correlated uniquenesses, indicating that observations of candidates' assertive IM behaviors during the assessment center possessed convergent validity. Further, a comparison between Model 3 and the more parsimonious Model 2, which assumes one instead of two dimension factors, also turned out significant, suggesting that the assessment center also possessed discriminant validity for the observation of candidates' assertive IM behaviors. In summary, these more elaborate analyses thus again confirm the claim issued in the original manuscript that candidates' assertive IM behaviors show construct related validity during the assessment center observations. Tables with detailed fit-statistics are available from the first author upon request.

H3. H3 stated that candidates' assertive IM behaviors were positively related to their overall performance ratings in an assessment center. This assumption was supported for both ingratiation ($r = .27, p < .01$) and self-promotion ($r = .61, p < .01$; Table 1).

H4. H4a proposed a link between candidates' level of ingratiation and assessor ratings of cooperation; H4b and H4c made similar propositions about self-promotion, leadership, and planning. As shown in Table 1, candidates' level of ingratiation significantly correlated with their performance ratings on the dimension cooperation ($r = .37, p < .01$). Analyses using Williams's t (Williams, 1959) revealed that this correlation was significantly larger than the correlations between ingratiation and ratings on the other two performance dimensions, $t_w(114) = 2.39, p < .01$ for leadership and $t_w(114) = 2.94, p < .01$ for planning.

Also as assumed, candidates' self-promotion correlated significantly with their leadership ratings in the assessment center ($r = .69, p < .01$), a correlation that was significantly larger than

the correlations between self-promotion and ratings on the dimensions planning, $t_w(114) = 3.68$, $p < .01$, and cooperation, $t_w(114) = 5.19$, $p < .01$. Yet, in line with the suggestion above that participants' self-promotion also makes them look particularly rational or knowledgeable, self-promotion correlated significantly higher with candidates' ratings on the dimension planning than on the dimension cooperation, $t_w(114) = 2.89$, $p < .01$. In summary, results thus supported H4.

H5. H5a stated that candidates' ingratiation during an assessment center would explain incremental variance in their cooperation during nonevaluative situations. H5b and H5c made comparable assumptions for candidates' self-promotion during the assessment center and their leadership and planning during nonevaluative situations. We tested these assumptions with a series of multiple regressions. The first step in these regressions represents the classic validity assumption underlying assessment centers, that is, we regressed candidates' performance on the target dimension in the assessment center on their average performance on the same dimension during the nonevaluative situations. The second set of regressions additionally included candidates' ingratiation or self-promotion into the regression to test for the incremental variance explained by the respective IM behaviors as proposed in H5a, H5b, and H5c.

As can be seen in Table 5, candidates' ingratiation during the assessment center indeed explained incremental variance in their cooperation in the nonevaluative situations, after controlling for the impact of their cooperation shown during the assessment center, thus supporting H5a. The same was also true for the effect of self-promotion in the prediction of candidates' planning during the nonevaluative situation, supporting H5c. Self-promotion explained no incremental variance, however, in candidates' leadership during the nonevaluative situation, thus showing no support for H5b.

DISCUSSION

The present study built on trait-activation theory to shed more light onto the nature and consequences of candidates' assertive IM behaviors during assessment centers. Results indeed revealed that, similar to earlier findings from the interview domain, candidates did show ingratiation and self-promotion behaviors during an assessment center. Even more, candidates adapted their behavior to the requirements of the situation and showed *more* of these assertive IM behaviors during the assessment center than during comparable but nonevaluative situations. Although frequently implied in earlier research (e.g., Anderson, 1991; Ellis et al., 2002; J. Hogan et al., 2007) and easily conceivable from trait-activation theory (Tett & Guterman, 2000), this assumption had so far never been tested. Yet it is a relevant prerequisite before we can convincingly argue that candidates' assertive IM behaviors during the assessment center exceed the behaviors that candidates show on a day-to-day basis. At the same time, the same assertive IM behaviors showed some level of construct related validity, suggesting that candidates' assertive IM behaviors during the assessment center represent more than a mere source of error but that they reflect meaningful interindividual differences in candidates' ingratiatory and self-promoting patterns.

Such behavioral patterns, of course, may still impact assessor's ratings of candidates' performance and results of the current study supported the notion that observers are indeed influenced by candidates' assertive IM behaviors. This gives more clarity to the few contradictory results about the effects of candidates' assertive IM behaviors during assessment centers (McFarland

TABLE 5
 Regressions of Candidates' Performance on the Targeted Dimensions During the Nonevaluative Performance Situations on the Basis of Their Performance in the Assessment Center and Their Respective Impression Management in the Assessment Center (AC) and the Nonevaluative Situation

<i>Predicting Cooperation During Nonevaluative Situations</i>												
<i>Step 1</i>			<i>Step 2 (H5a)</i>			<i>Step 3</i>						
<i>B</i>	<i>SEB</i>	β	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SEB</i>	β	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SEB</i>	β	<i>p</i>	
Cooperation AC	.273	.065	.370	.000	.218	.068	.295	.002	.196	.064	.265	.003
Ingratiation AC				.184	.084	.203	.030		.138	.079	.152	.085
Ingratiation noneval. sit.			ΔR^2			ΔR^2	<i>p</i>		.361	.090	.331	.000
			.129			.158	.030		Adjusted R^2		ΔR^2	<i>p</i>
			.137			.036	.030		.258		.105	.000
<i>Predicting Leadership During Nonevaluative Situations</i>												
<i>Step 1</i>			<i>Step 2 (H5b)</i>			<i>Step 3</i>						
<i>B</i>	<i>SEB</i>	β	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SEB</i>	β	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SEB</i>	β	<i>p</i>	
Leadership AC	.275	.074	.331	.000	.184	.102	.222	.074	.059	.081	.070	.472
Self-prom. AC				.154	.120	.158	.203		.115	.094	.117	.225
Self-promot. noneval. sit.			ΔR^2			ΔR^2	<i>p</i>		.711	.083	.617	.000
			.102			.107	.203		Adjusted R^2		ΔR^2	<i>p</i>
			.110			.013	.203		.456		.348	.000
<i>Predicting Planning During Nonevaluative Situations</i>												
<i>Step 1</i>			<i>Step 2 (H5c)</i>			<i>Step 3</i>						
<i>B</i>	<i>SEB</i>	β	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SEB</i>	β	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SEB</i>	β	<i>p</i>	
Planning AC	.326	.076	.375	.000	.211	.085	.243	.015	.174	.081	.201	.034
Self-prom. AC				.240	.088	.266	.008		.193	.085	.214	.024
Self-promot. noneval. sit.			ΔR^2			ΔR^2	<i>p</i>		.328	.089	.309	.000
			.133			.180	.008		Adjusted R^2		ΔR^2	<i>p</i>
			.141			.053	.008		.264		.089	.000

et al., 2003; McFarland et al., 2005). It also stands in line with research on selection interviews (e.g., Barrick et al., 2009; Ellis et al., 2002; Peeters & Lievens, 2006) and demonstrates that candidates can influence their selection outcomes in different types of situational interactions.

Both trait-activation theory and the current results suggest, however, that we need to focus less on candidates' overall IM behaviors and performance ratings during the assessment center and more on their specific dimensions. Rather than representing an overall effect, the effects of candidates' assertive IM behaviors varied by dimension. Ingratiation led to higher ratings particularly on the "feeling" dimension cooperation and self-promotion led to higher ratings particularly on the "power" dimension leadership and on the "thinking" dimension planning. These findings are not only in line with trait-activation theory, they also underline the idea that candidates' assertive IM behaviors represent candidates' striving to get along and/or get ahead. Consequently, these behaviors can emerge as more or less appropriate in different situations (R. Hogan, 1991, 1996).

Assessment centers have traditionally been designed to select future managers, that is, people in leadership roles with responsibilities for personnel and projects. Current results suggest that a certain level of self-promotion in particular seems rather suitable in claiming and gaining leadership positions. Although traditionally feared to be an inappropriate influence tactic during personnel selection (Anderson, 1991), self-promotion is conceptually closely related to attributes relevant for prototypical leaders and thus for emerging in leading positions (i.e., dominance and self-efficacy; e.g., Chemers et al., 2000; Gough, 1990; Judge et al., 2002; Smith & Foti, 1998). Even more, it represents one of the behaviors characterizing charismatic leaders (i.e., engaging in behaviors designed to impress followers, such as talking about prior accomplishments; Yukl, 2006). A similar argument can be made about candidates' ingratiation, which can greatly facilitate social interactions and foster group cohesion (Nguyen et al., 2008; Rosenfeld et al., 1995). In the context of leadership, ingratiation can facilitate leaders' individualized consideration to their followers, for example, by showing personalized interest in and listening attentively to follower needs, abilities, and aspirations—thus, in turn, facilitating transformational leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1997). In summary, assertive IM behaviors may not only be rewarded by observers in assessment centers, they may also present traits useful for the candidate enacting these behaviors and for the people and teams dependent on them.

To make such a claim, however, these assertive IM behaviors would need to be part of a candidate's behavioral pattern, that is, they would need to show construct-related validity. Indeed, the current results also support this assumption based on trait-activation theory, suggesting that assertive IM behaviors reflect meaningful individual differences between candidates—a finding in line with earlier research showing that candidates' assertive IM behaviors during selection interviews were significantly linked to their personality (e.g., Van Iddekinge et al., 2007).

Also, the observation of candidates' assertive IM behaviors during personnel selection does not imply that candidates would act completely differently when not facing a high-stakes situation such as during personnel selection. Rather, although candidates showed significantly fewer assertive IM behaviors during the nonevaluative situation, they still did show them, and showed them with comparable success. Thus, results of the current study suggest that the effectiveness of assertive IM behaviors is not constrained to the selection situation alone. Rather, high ingratiation and self-promotion proved helpful to candidates also during nonevaluative (i.e., more typical) working situations. Here, too, candidates received better ratings on the dimensions originally deemed relevant for high performance the more they showed these assertive IM behaviors.

Finally, candidates' assertive IM behaviors during the assessment center also ended up contributing to, rather than detracting from, the assessment center's ability to relate to candidates' performance during these nonevaluative situations. In summary, results thus suggest that IM may actually be a useful variable to observe during assessment centers.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Although we deem the current study helpful and relevant for gaining more insights into the nature and consequences of candidates' assertive IM behaviors during assessment centers, it is not without shortcomings. First among these is that the assessment center was run in the context of a selection-training program rather than an actual personnel selection, which raises the question of whether participants behaved differently during the assessment center than they would have during an actual selection. Considering the use of a very similar research paradigm in earlier published studies (e.g., Kleinmann, 1993; König, 2007) and candidates' reactions during the assessment center, we do not believe this to have been a serious issue. To enhance participant motivation, candidates had to pay a small fee as well as submit their application to the target position prior to admission to the assessment center. The training targeted recent or soon-to-be university graduates looking for jobs and candidates used the training program as a chance to prepare for an actual selection by practicing and receiving detailed and personalized feedback about their performance during the assessment center. Posttraining feedback indicated that participants perceived the training program as very realistic, also eliciting realistic participant reactions.

A second concern is that candidates' performance during the nonevaluative comparison situation was also observed in the context of the application training. This behavior might thus in turn be more similar to the behavior shown during the assessment center than one would usually expect if the performance had been measured on the job. Although this may be a valid concern in terms of ecological validity, we chose the current design for internal validity reasons, that is, to ensure that candidates' assertive IM behaviors and their performance were assessed under otherwise comparable conditions during both the assessment center and the nonevaluative assessments, thus ruling out possible confounds and alternative explanations. Also the need to record candidates' behavior on video without their explicit knowledge made us choose the setting of an application-training program, rather than a true selection context, in which such a procedure would have been quite unethical. In the current setting, we were able to address this issue via an informed consent and a debriefing at the conclusion of the study. Although responses to the debriefing, the manipulation check, and the observed drop in assertive IM behaviors revealed that participants had not expected such evaluation during the nonevaluative situations, they agreed with it post hoc for the benefit of research and in return for their own learning experience during the application training. In the future, a study of candidates' assertive IM behaviors in a job context would be useful, however, and although we had no access to such data ourselves, settings such as in call centers, for example, may allow for such a study.

Another line of research may focus more on the IM behaviors targeted in the area of leadership. Although usually eyed skeptically during personnel selection (e.g., Anderson, 1991) out of fear that people might be "acting up" or showing a picture of themselves that does not reflect their true nature, very similar behaviors are often evaluated more positively in the literature on transformational and charismatic leadership (e.g., Bass & Avolio, 1997)—as well as in the literature

on political skills (e.g., Ferris et al., 2007). Political skills entail, among other factors, the abilities to network and to influence others—effects that may be very difficult to accomplish without the behaviors usually ascribed to ingratiation and self-promotion.

Relevant to the study of political skills may also be candidates' social astuteness or their ability to identify what is happening in social situations and what is being required of them (Kleinmann, 1993). Past research has repeatedly found that candidates reliably differ in their understanding of the dimensions targeted during personnel selection with candidates who interpret the situations more accurately subsequently scoring higher on the respective performance dimension. The same may be true for candidates' understanding of the impression management behaviors needed during personnel selection or more typical working situations. Relatedly, some past research on IM behaviors has also reported the existence of a "too much of a good thing" effect by which IM behaviors, usually rewarded by positive evaluations, may backfire during personnel selection if they are being perceived as exaggerated and thus insincere (e.g., Baron, 1989). It is well conceivable that such exaggeration of IM happens particularly among participants who are unable to adequately read the requirements of the situation and to adjust their behaviors accordingly.

Finally, future research may also consider the role of candidates' defensive IM behaviors during the selection process. Although most research concludes that defensive behavior is of less relevance during personnel selection than assertive behaviors (Ellis et al., 2002; Gilmore & Ferris, 1989), such assertion may also depend on the context and/or stage of the selection process that one is looking at. On general terms, organizations are not only selecting but also recruiting candidates and may thus try to avoid situations during their selection procedure in which they threaten candidates to "lose face" and thus make them feel uncomfortable and in need to defend themselves (Goffman, 1955). In addition, assessment centers in particular usually happen as the last of several stages in a multihurdle selection process. At this stage, most organizations will already have "screened out" less promising candidates and will now be particularly interested in "selecting in" the most suitable candidates into the organization. Therefore, their basic approach toward these candidates is going to be positive to begin with, thus giving applicants little reason to believe that they may need to defend themselves. Yet future research may try to address the varying roles of defensive versus assertive IM behaviors, both in frequency and in consequences early and late during the selection process, as well as in different types of settings and samples. Particularly in the context of challenging jobs which setbacks and failures are the norm rather than the exception, it may be interesting to create assessment center tasks that force candidates to fail and to observe the assertive as well as defensive IM behaviors that candidates use in response.

Conclusion

The results of this study support the notion based on trait-activation theory that candidates show more assertive IM behaviors during an assessment center than during nonevaluative but otherwise comparable performance situations, and that assessment center observers reward such assertive IM behaviors with good performance ratings. This effect, however, was quite dimension dependent, with candidates' self-promotion linking primarily to higher performance ratings on the dimensions leadership and planning and their ingratiation linking to higher ratings on the dimension cooperation. Further, these assertive IM behaviors showed internal construct-related validity and additionally related positively to candidates' performance in otherwise comparable

nonevaluative situations. In sum, these results suggest that candidates' assertive IM behaviors shown during assessment centers may represent a meaningful and performance-relevant individual difference variable worthy of further investigation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The research reported in this article was supported by a grant from the Swiss National Science Foundation (Schweizerischer Nationalfonds, Grant 100014-124449).

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