

**Neither here, nor there:
impression management does not predict expatriate adjustment and job
performance**

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Abstract

Social desirability scale scores reflect substantive individual differences related to personality. The objective of the current study was to examine whether social desirability, and impression management specifically (a component of social desirability), is predictive of adjustment and job performance for expatriates. Based on theoretical considerations, it was proposed that impression management might be linked to expatriate job performance in a predictive and mediated relationship through adjustment. Job performance ratings provided by host country national co-workers were obtained for 308 expatriates on assignment in Turkey. Expatriates responded to a measure of personality and cross cultural adjustment. It was found that impression management scale scores were not related to either adjustment or job performance. These results are discussed in the broader context of research on social desirability, expatriate job performance, and expatriate research in general.

Key words: expatriate, impression management, job performance, adjustment

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Social desirability scale scores reflect substantive individual differences related to personality (McCrae & Costa, 1983; Ones, Viswesvaran, & Reiss, 1996). As such, a theoretical case can be made for the construct itself being predictive of on-the-job behaviors such as job performance (see Viswesvaran, Ones, & Hough, 2001). The overall objective of this study is to examine whether indeed social desirability, and impression management specifically (a component of the social desirability construct), are predictive of job performance for expatriates.

Research has found that social desirability is related to individual differences in personality; specifically emotional stability and conscientiousness. Scores on scales designed to measure personality are correlated with scores on scales designed to measure a socially desirable response set (McCrae & Costa, 1983; Nicholson & Hogan, 1990). Such findings can be interpreted in two ways: 1) social desirability may be a style of responding that systematically biases and contaminates measures of personality, in which case the observed covariation indicates the uninterpretability of the personality scale scores, or 2) social desirability scales may actually capture personality trait variance and the observed covariation would thus suggest that social desirability scales assess at least some substance as opposed to all style.

As both McCrae and Costa (1983) and Ones, Viswesvaran, and Reiss (1996) show, self-report studies alone cannot adequately disentangle whether social desirability is a response style or a trait. In obtaining others' ratings of personality, however, it becomes possible to assess the proportion of substance (i.e., personality trait variance) versus style (i.e. response set) in a social desirability measure. Ones et al. (1996) meta-analytically cumulated the correlations between social desirability scale scores and Big Five dimensions of personality as rated by others and found the same pattern of population correlations as was identified for self ratings, although the former were of a lesser magnitude. Taken together, these findings indicate that social desirability is consistently related to individual differences in emotional stability and conscientiousness, thereby providing further credence to the arguments made by some personality researchers about the nature of socially desirable responding. Meta-analysis indicates that the estimated population correlation between emotional stability and social desirability is .37 ($N = 143, 794$, $K = 467$), while the estimated population correlation between social desirability and conscientiousness is .20 ($N = 46,972$, $K = 239$).

In his review of the literature on response bias, social desirability, and dissimulation, Furnham (1986) argues that there is reason to believe social desirability is not a situation-specific response set that invalidates scores on personality scales. Furnham (1986) is not alone in concluding that, "rather than considering social desirability a mere response artifact that threatens the validity of self-report it should be seen as a substantive trait useful in predicting behavior" (p. 398). However, one of the conclusions from meta-analytic research on social desirability is that even though social desirability scales measure some true variance in personality, the construct as currently operationalized in social desirability scales does not contribute to the prediction of job performance (Ones et al., 1996).

Hogan and Shelton (1998) assert a socio-analytic explanation of personality, which may suggest that social desirability is predictive of job performance. They argue that when individuals respond to personality measures, they are not providing self-reports in the sense we have become accustomed to thinking about item endorsements. Instead, when interacting with both test items and people alike, individuals offer self-presentations by which they reveal their identities in a negotiated form. Further, it is proposed that individuals behave in

such a way as to be consistent with that identity and the reputation it garners in the eyes of observers (Hogan & Shelton, 1998). According to Hogan (1998), however, some people care more about their reputations than others, and "some people are better at managing them than others, and these individual differences are related to individual differences in status and acceptance" (p. 7). It appears conceivable from this perspective that scores on social desirability scales may be predictive of individual differences in performance. This is in so far as one's ability to manage one's impression in a socially desirable direction may suggest an awareness of social norms, which may be related to subsequent interactions essential to job performance (Hogan, Hogan, & Roberts, 1996). As yet, however, meta-analytic evidence (e.g. Ones et al., 1996) does not support such an expectation. Typical corrected correlations between social desirability scales and job performance are very low, averaging to .01 (Ones et al., 1996).

Viswesvaran, Ones, and Hough (2001) review three alternative hypotheses for the meta-analytic results reported in Ones et al. (1996) that social desirability scales do not predict job performance. First, it may be that individual differences in social desirability are predictive of job performance in some jobs, but not all jobs. Certainly, a meta-analytic accumulation of results across different jobs cannot adequately address this potential explanation unless adequate number of studies exist to conduct moderator analyses by job or job family. Rosse, Stetcher, Miller and Levin (1998) note that it is possible there are some jobs for which individual differences in social desirability predict job performance better than for other jobs. Rosse et al. suggest that "a reasonable case can be made that the job-relatedness of being able to provide socially desirable responses depends on the nature of the job" (p. 642). They suggest that for jobs involving considerable interpersonal interaction, especially if superficial or short-lived, an awareness of social norms and expectations may be useful. A second alternative explanation for the results of Ones et al. (1996) is that no distinction was made between the two well-accepted dimensions of social desirability. These are labeled self-deception (in which the respondent actually believes his or her positive self reports) and impression management (in which the respondent consciously attempts to dissimulate), which are believed to characterize the 'self deception' and 'other deception' components of the social desirability construct, respectively. It is possible that when examining the social desirability—job performance linkage by looking at self-deception and impression management independently, one might find different results. Third, it may be that social desirability scale scores (or just impression management scale scores) are related to specific dimensions of job performance rather than overall job performance. It is plausible that social desirability reflects a strategy that predicts performance for certain dimensions of job performance (e.g., interpersonal skill or customer service performance), but not other dimensions like technical proficiency (Viswesvaran et al., 2001).

Viswesvaran et al. (2001) conducted three studies (one meta-analytic, $k = 17$; $N = 20,069$ and two using primary data, $N=826$) to investigate whether impression management predicts job performance in managerial jobs. In doing so, the three aforementioned alternative hypotheses were addressed by focusing on 1) a job that typically involves considerable interpersonal interaction for which individual differences in social desirability may be related to performance, 2) impression management, and 3) specific dimensions of job performance in addition to overall ratings of performance. However, disappointingly, across the three studies, there was little evidence to suggest that impression management scales predicted job performance in a job for which interpersonal interactions are important.

Impression management and expatriate job performance: a theoretical case

While the results of Viswesvaran et al. (2001) may seem discouraging to those seeking to find a link between social desirability and job performance constructs, they do not rule out further empirical investigations. Viswesvaran et al. (2001) examined the issue only for managerial jobs performed in the United States. A more convincing argument can be made for social desirability being substantively related to job performance for *expatriate* managers. Certainly, several authors (e.g., Mendenhall & Wiley, 1994; Giacalone & Beard, 1994) have made similar arguments from a theoretical perspective, but as yet their propositions remain empirically untested. In this section of our manuscript, we make a case for how and why social desirability, and impression management specifically, might be substantively related to expatriate job performance.

Mendenhall and Wiley (1994) propose that in order to reduce the psychological uncertainty of being situated in a new culture, the expatriate must embark on a strategy, the end result of which is adjustment or, alternatively, psychological comfort with the host culture. Such strategies can range from being open to and attempting to learn a new set of social norms, values, and behaviors of the host culture, to persisting in one's own cognitions and behaviors that may or may not be congruent with the host culture. The former strategy constitutes a means to adjustment, while the latter makes adjustment less likely and satisfactory in the long run.

The ability to adjust to the host culture appears to be of key importance to successful and productive overseas work assignments. Moreover, an understanding of impression management offers a cognitive and interpersonal heuristic by which to explain how individuals' abilities and predispositions prior to leaving their home country may affect expatriate adjustment once overseas (Montagliani & Giacalone, 1998). In other words, certain individuals may be able to better identify, attend to, and control the impressions they make on others and thus 'acculturate' more effectively. This is largely congruent with Hogan's assertion that social desirability captures awareness of dominant social norms, and with Rosse et al's (1998) suggestion that for jobs involving considerable interpersonal interaction, an awareness of social norms and expectations may be useful. An expatriate manager must clearly perform not only the demanding interpersonal interactions that are required of him or her in their home office, but additionally must negotiate the tricky waters of frequent and unavoidable interpersonal interactions with host country national coworkers. In this endeavor, paying close attention to the various facets of the host culture and manifesting the appropriate behavioral content may well facilitate adjustment and promote job performance.

It is proposed here that impression management is linked to expatriate job performance in a predictive and mediated relationship through adjustment. Ones and Viswesvaran (1997) argue that if adjustment is indeed a proximal determinant of expatriate job performance, then personality variables are at least partially likely to relate to job performance through the adjustment construct. The present study seeks to determine whether impression management predicts job performance and whether adjustment mediates this relationship. This relationship will be examined both for overall job performance and specific dimensions of job performance, as it has been proposed that impression management scale scores may be related to some dimensions of job performance but not others (Viswesvaran et al., 2001). Moreover, like Viswesvaran et al. (2001), only the impression management component of social desirability will be examined for a sample of expatriates, whose jobs are considered interperson-

ally demanding. It is important to note that for a mediation model to be shown to adequately explain the proposed relationships, a direct relationship between impression management and job performance is necessary.

Only one other study could be located that examined impression management in cross cultural settings. Montagliani and Giacalone (1998) assessed the relationship between impression management and cross-cultural adaptation. In a sample of 112 US employees based in international corporations ($n = 35$) and international undergraduate students enrolled in an international management course ($n = 77$), the authors found a significant relationship between responses to two measures of impression management and two measures of cross-cultural adaptability. It was concluded that the tendency to engage in impression management may be related to the ability to adapt cross-culturally. However, given the rather low sample size, these results must be interpreted with utmost caution and further work among expatriates would be a valuable addition to this line of research.

Not only does the present study inform the literature on questions pertaining to impression management and social desirability, but through good measurement and data collection, it can also provide invaluable information about the relationship between adjustment and expatriate job performance, the personality predictors of expatriate job performance, and potential mediated relationships between personality and job performance through adjustment.

Methods

Samples

Data were collected from 311 expatriates currently on an international assignment in Turkey and one host country national co-worker of each expatriate. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary for the expatriates and the host-country national co-workers. Three hundred and eight expatriate-host country national pairs provided usable data. Participants were recruited on a word-of-mouth basis through students attending university courses in Istanbul. Hence, a broad range of industries was represented among the organizations from which data were gathered. These included finance/banking, tourism, education, marketing, and engineering. Personality measures, cross-cultural adjustment scales, and job performance appraisal forms were distributed to expatriate-host country national pairs independently. Demographic background data were also collected from participants.

Expatriate sample characteristics

Expatriates completed a demographic information form, a supplemental expatriate information form, and a personality questionnaire. The mean age for the expatriates was 38.2 ($SD = 10.3$). Two hundred and one expatriates were males and 105 were females (5 did not report their sex), of which 155 reported being married and 95 reported being single. For those who responded to questions about the presence of a spouse or children in Turkey, 133 reported having their spouse present, while 29 did not have a spouse accompany them

abroad. Eighty-eight expatriates also had their children with them in Turkey, while 45 did not.

The average expatriate had 13 years of full-time work experience, and on average 6 years with the present organization. The average number of years expatriates had spent in previous overseas assignments was 7.2 (SD = 7.5). For the average expatriate, the expected duration of their assignment in Turkey was 11.7 months (SD = 16.7). International assignee participants included executive, mid- and lower-level managerial personnel as well as non-managerial personnel, mainly from service and educational occupations. The expatriates were citizens of 35 different countries. The largest number of expatriates were from the UK/Ireland (N = 70), the United States (N = 49), and Germany (N = 35).

Host country national co-worker sample characteristics

Host country national co-workers provided confidential job performance ratings for the expatriate with whom they were working. The mean age for the host country co-workers was 33.1 (SD = 8.95). Of those individuals reporting gender information, 116 were males and 175 were females. Host country nationals reported an average of 8.3 years experience in their present occupation (SD = 8.2). In terms of how long they had worked with the expatriate for whom they provided job performance ratings, host country nationals reported an average of 13.4 months (SD = 25.1). The expatriates in this study occupied the middle and upper ranks of their organizations in Turkey. Hence, 80 of the host country nationals reported that the expatriate was their supervisor, 120 reported that the expatriate was their co-worker, and 29 reported that the expatriate with whom they were working was their subordinate.

Measures, procedures, and psychometric properties of the scales used

California Psychological Inventory (CPI) Good Impression Scale. Twelve scale items from the CPI Good Impression (GI) scale were used to assess impression management. The GI scale attempts to identify individuals who are capable of creating a favorable impression of themselves and who are concerned about how others react to them. The coefficient alpha reliability for the twelve item GI scale was .59. The GI scale items utilized in this research are provided in Table 1.

Job Performance. The host country nationals completed a 53-item job performance evaluation rating their co-worker on 10 dimensions of expatriate job performance. The instrument was constructed directly in Turkish (i.e., it was not a translated instrument). The items were written to reflect the following performance dimensions (see also Appendix A): adjustment to foreign business practices, establishing and maintaining business contacts, technical competence, working with others, communicating/persuading, initiative and effort, personal discipline, interpersonal relations, management and supervision, productivity, and overall job performance. Each performance dimension for expatriates was based on work conducted by Campbell (1990), Hough and Dunnette (1992), and Viswesvaran (1993). An overall performance index was created using the 53 items and an overall job performance

Table 1:
Good Impression scale items used in the current study

Scale Items
1. I think most people would lie to get ahead
2. It bothers me when something unexpected interrupts my daily routine
3. Sometimes I cross the street just to avoid meeting someone.
4. I like to boast about my achievements every now and again.
5. I must admit I often try to get my own way regardless of what others may want.
6. I dream frequently about things that are best kept to myself.
7. I often act on the spur of the moment without stopping to think.
8. Sometimes at elections I vote for men about whom I know very little.
9. I am apt to show off in some way if I get the chance.
10. There have been times when I have been very angry
11. There have been a few times when I have been very mean to another person.
12. Sometimes I rather enjoy going against the rules and doing things I'm not supposed to.

item, which was found to correlate highly ($r = .76$) with the performance items represented in the initial composite. Consequently, the two were not retained as separate variables, and the final overall job performance score reflects a composite variable of 54 items.

The host country nationals read each job performance item and rated its accuracy on a nine-point Likert scale in describing the on-the-job behavior of the expatriate with whom they were working. The scale anchors ranged from 1 = extremely inaccurate to 9 = extremely accurate. The 54-item composite had a coefficient alpha reliability of .98 and was used in all subsequent analyses.

Adjustment to living abroad. Adjustment to living abroad was operationalized as general adjustment to living abroad. The scale used consisted of a total of 9 items from Black and Stephens (1989) that asked the expatriates to rate on a scale from 1 (unadjusted) to 10 (adjusted) their adjustment to conditions and environment they faced in Turkey. The nine items included adjustment to health care facilities, shopping, entertainment, housing conditions, food, cost of living, living conditions in general, interactions with Turks on a daily basis, and socialization with Turks. The coefficient alpha reliability for this scale was .81.

Analyses

Correlational analyses were conducted. In cases where item level data were missing, mean substitution was chosen as the most appropriate missing data technique, allowing the use of the mean value of a variable to be used in place of missing data values for that same variable. Roth (1994) suggests that this method works equally well as pairwise deletion in terms of accuracy and represents a satisfactory solution to handle missing data. We used mean substitution for those participants who answered at least two thirds of the questions on

the job performance, adjustment, and GI scales. In analyses that involved calculating the intercorrelation matrix between job performance, adjustment, and GI scales, data were omitted according to pair-wise deletion.

Results

The observed (r) and unreliability corrected correlations (ρ) between GI and adjustment and job performance are reported in Table 2. We also report observed and unreliability corrected 90% confidence intervals for the relationships. Reliability corrections utilized coefficient alphas, as these were the only coefficients available. The correlations involving the relationships between overall job performance, adjustment, and GI were disappointingly low. Further, examining these relationships in finer terms using the various dimensions of job performance did not produce more encouraging results. It was predicted that GI and adjustment would be more highly correlated with interpersonally oriented dimensions (e.g., Interpersonal Relations and Establishing & Maintaining Business Contacts). However, none of these were any more strongly related to either adjustment or GI than were dimensions like Technical Competence and Productivity.

Table 2:
Intercorrelations between Good Impression scores and adjustment and job performance

Variable	n	r	90% CI	ρ	90% CI around ρ
1. Adjustment	224	0.0140	-0.0958 - 0.1238	0.0203	-0.1386 - 0.1791
2. Overall Job Performance	206	-0.0090	-0.1235 - 0.1055	-0.0118	-0.1625 - 0.1388
3. Adjusting to Foreign Business Practices	224	0.0240	-0.0858 - 0.1338	0.0339	-0.1298 - 0.1889
4. Establishing & Maintaining Business Contacts	224	0.0260	-0.0837 - 0.1357	0.0367	-0.1183 - 0.1917
5. Technical Competence	224	0.0890	-0.0200 - 0.1980	0.1215	-0.0272 - 0.2702
6. Working with Others	224	0.0070	-0.1028 - 0.1168	0.0099	-0.1460 - 0.1659
7. Communicating & Persuading	224	-0.0070	-0.1168 - 0.1028	-0.0099	-0.1650 - 0.1452
8. Initiative & Effort	224	-0.0200	-0.1298 - 0.0898	-0.0274	-0.1781 - 0.1232
9. Personal Discipline	224	0.0770	-0.0322 - 0.1862	0.1069	-0.0446 - 0.2584
10. Interpersonal Relations	224	-0.0090	-0.1188 - 0.1008	-0.0124	-0.1630 - 0.1383
11. Management & Supervision	224	0.0050	-0.1048 - 0.1148	0.0073	-0.1535 - 0.1682
12. Productivity	224	-0.0200	-0.1298 - 0.0898	-0.0271	-0.1762 - 0.1219

Note. 90% CI = 90% confidence interval; ρ = correlations corrected for unreliability in both variables.

In light of these null results, it was decided that a test for the mediation of adjustment in the relationship between impression management and job performance would be unnecessary and therefore no further analyses were conducted. In order to examine data for mediation, a main effect between GI and job performance must be demonstrated, in addition to a relationship between GI and adjustment, and between adjustment and job performance. As was detailed above, such a data analysis was not supported by the bivariate relationships between adjustment, GI, and job performance, and was therefore deemed unsuitable and futile.

Discussion

On the surface, the results of this study are discouraging with respect to impression management and the ongoing search for its predictive validity in terms of job performance and other important variables in IO research. The case was made here that strong theoretical reasons exist as to why scores on impression management should be related to expatriate adjustment, which in turn is expected to predict expatriate job performance. However, in line with previous research, one must conclude from the present study that impression management is related to neither adjustment nor job performance in any meaningful way. Such a finding precludes any investigation of adjustment as a mediator of the impression management-job performance relationship.

The results of the present study closely mirror those of Viswesvaran et al. (2001). Here too an attempt was made to explicitly measure the impression management component of social desirability, to do so for a sample of individuals employed in interpersonally demanding jobs (i.e. expatriates), and gather performance data that permitted the examination of relationships with both overall performance and its dimensions. Despite the fact that clear attention was paid to the core issues that have plagued previous research investigating social desirability and job performance, no progress was made in identifying a meaningful, theoretically consistent relationship between the two variables.

Despite the fact that no meaningful and theoretically consistent relationships between impression management, adjustment, and job performance were observed, it should be noted that much progress was made in terms of expatriate research itself. Indeed, the strengths of this study lie in overcoming many of the problems commonly cited with expatriate research. These problems include the appropriateness of the sample, the sources of ratings, the dimensionality of job performance, the selection of appropriate criteria, and sample size (see Sianigil & Ones, 2001 for a more detailed discussion). The present study addressed these concerns in the following ways. First, the sample of expatriate participants used here came from a variety of paying jobs, none of which involved the kind of volunteer work in the context of non-profit organizations that is often solicited for expatriate research. In addition, the expatriate sample represented multiple nationalities, with most individuals also reporting experience in countries other than Turkey. Second, unlike a great deal of expatriate research, which relies on single-source ratings and potentially suffers from common method variance, the present study used job performance ratings from host country nationals in addition to self-report personality and adjustment data from the expatriates themselves. Having non self-report performance data represents a large improvement on previous expatriate research, which has relied almost exclusively on expatriates as the source for all data collected. Third, the job performance measure employed here represents an integration of research on both

domestic and expatriate performance dimensions (e.g. Campbell, 1990; Hough & Dunnette, 1992, and Viswesvaran, 1993). The inclusion of expatriate specific components is a necessary addition to typical, more general measures of job performance, which have been heavily used in expatriate research. Fourth, the criterion chosen here was actual job performance, as opposed to tenure or turnover. The latter have often been used in expatriate research to represent the poorly specified criterion of "overseas success" (Sinangil & Ones, 2001). However, by employing a well-defined, multi-dimensional measure of expatriate job performance, the present study brings expatriate research more closely in line with years of domestic IO research. The present study made great strides in moving away from single-source ratings, but further improvements could be attained by identifying sources for multiple ratings of key variables. Lastly, we believe it is important to point out that the null results obtained in this study are valuable as they may help us with understanding the elusive construct of social desirability. In order to further our understanding of this construct, future research should replicate these findings in other cultural and occupational contexts.

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Appendix see next page.

Appendix A

Description of Expatriate Job Performance Dimensions, their Source(s), Number of Items, and Reliabilities

Job Performance Dimension	Description (<i>Sample Item</i>)	Source for Measure	No. of Items	Alpha*
Adjustment to Foreign Business Practices	Knowledge and application of appropriate foreign business practices (<i>Has knowledge about Turkish work life applications</i>)	Hough & Dunnette (1992)	3	.74
Establishing and Maintaining Business Contacts	Identifying, developing, using, and maintaining business contacts to achieve goals (<i>Can develop a communication net with people that he/she comes into contact with at work</i>)	Hough & Dunnette (1992)	4	.85
Technical Competence	Measure of the knowledge required to carry out the tasks of the job (<i>Uses technical knowledge in solving difficult problems and in helping reach high quality decisions</i>)	Hough & Dunnette (1992) & Viswesvaran (1993)	3	.91
Working with Others	Proficiency in working with others, assisting others in the organization (<i>Has planful and effective work relations with superiors and coworkers</i>)	Hough & Dunnette (1992)	4	.84
Communicating and Persuading	Oral and written proficiency in gathering and transmitting information; persuading others (<i>Is effective in oral and written communication</i>)	Hough & Dunnette (1992)	3	.85
Initiative and Effort	Dedication to one's job; amount of work expended in striving to do a good job (<i>Has initiative and takes on extra responsibility</i>)	Hough & Dunnette (1992)	11	.90
Personal Discipline	The extent to which counterproductive behaviors at work are avoided (<i>Follows rules and regulations and respects authority</i>)	Campbell (1990) & Viswesvaran (1993)	8	.88
Interpersonal relations	The degree to which the expatriate facilitates team performance; supports and champions others in the organization and unit (<i>Cooperates with others at work</i>)	Campbell (1990) & Viswesvaran (1993)	8	.90
Management & Supervision	Proficiency in the coordination of different roles in the organization (<i>Provides supervision to subordinates</i>)	Campbell (1990) & Viswesvaran (1993)	5	.79
Productivity	Volume of work produced by the expatriate (<i>Is productive</i>)	Viswesvaran (1993)	4	.92
Overall Expatriate Job Performance	A composite of the 10 scales (53 items) and one overall job performance item	Campbell (1990), Hough & Dunnette (1992), & Viswesvaran (1993)	54	.98

* $N = 285 - 300$. Note: Descriptions are distilled from Campbell et al. (1996), Hough and Dunnette (1992), Ones and Viswesvaran (1997), and Viswesvaran et al. (1996). Sample items are translated from the original Turkish (i.e. items were used in the original Turkish version).