

# A Rose by Any Other Name: Identity and Impression Management in Résumés

David M. Kaplan · James E. Fisher

Published online: 2 September 2009  
© Springer Science + Business Media, LLC 2009

**Abstract** Résumés provide critical information for organizations to make selection decisions and applicants with their first opportunity to influence decision makers. While résumés are intended to convey job relevant information, they also potentially provide information about applicants that could hinder their employment prospects. For example, many names give clues about an applicant's sex or race, and previous research has shown this can have negative implications for historically disadvantaged groups. This creates an incentive for some people to engage in impression management regarding how they identify themselves in their résumé. The paper develops a typology for assessing the ethics of these attempts at impression management. Sample vignettes are provided to help explicate the proposed typology.

**Key words** ethics · résumés · identity · impression management

The saying goes that you have only one chance to make a first impression and this is often the case for job seekers. This truism is reflected in the time and attention that many attach to résumé construction, assigning it considerable significance in the job search process. Employers quickly scan résumés and often look for reasons to eliminate rather than elevate an applicant. Because the facts of a person's résumé are relatively fixed, individuals instead focus their efforts on how this information will be presented to potential employers. For this reason, many job seekers are discouraged from submitting résumés that exceed a single page. Similarly, they spend hours revising their résumés so that they use the right phrasing and select the best formatting options to improve their odds of getting a second look.

---

D. M. Kaplan (✉)  
Department of Management, Saint Louis University,  
3674 Lindell Blvd., St. Louis, MO 63108-3397, USA  
e-mail: kaplandm@slu.edu

J. E. Fisher  
Department of Marketing, Saint Louis University,  
3674 Lindell Blvd., St. Louis, MO 63108-3397, USA  
e-mail: fisherje@slu.edu

Despite the best efforts of these individuals, the decision of whether to grant an interview may already be made before the employer reads how the applicant has, let us say, spearheaded some important corporate initiative. While employment decisions are supposed to be made fairly and reasonably, this is not always the case. The need for civil rights legislation and the caseload of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission are testament to the fact that employers do at times engage in bias if not outright discrimination. Even though résumés in the United States do not include pictures of the applicant, they can still provide clues about the individual's identity. The most common location of such identifying information is at the top of the résumé where applicants list, and often boldly, their name (Bart *et al.* 1997; Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004; Ford *et al.* 2004). Additional items that convey certain aspects of a person's identity can include extracurricular activities, community organizations and educational institutions attended (Davis and Muir 2003; Kirby 2006).

Similarly, job seekers can craft information on their resumes to mask identifying information. This paper is concerned with the strategies that individuals may use to control and present their identities in résumés (Bennington and Wein 2002; Davis and Muir 2003; Kirby 2006). Such strategic presentation of identifying information is a recognized form of impression management (Applebaum and Hughes 1998) and is consistent with self-verification theory, which allows that the effort to shape the perceptions of others may commence even before an actual occasion of social interaction (Swann 1983). Impression management can become an ethical concern when it is enlisted to influence and to persuade in ways that are considered deceptive, manipulative or coercive (Sussman *et al.* 2002).

Two factors related to impression management in résumés that will be explored in the paper are the method that an individual uses to control identifying information and the individual's motivation for engaging in the strategy.<sup>1</sup> Although making assessments of these impression management tactics might seem suspect to some because these actions are taken in response to perceived societal bias and discrimination, it is realistic in terms of how these individuals will be judged in specific contexts. Furthermore, this approach is consistent with similar research on résumé ethics (Marcoux 2006).

### Impression Management Opportunities in the Selection Process

Typically when scholars examine issues of impression management in the selection process they focus on the interview (Fletcher 1992; Gilmore and Ferris 1989; Gilmore *et al.* 1999; Howard and Ferris 1996; Stevens and Kristof 1995); however, it is appropriate to consider that people begin these tactics in their first communication with a potential employer, which is often the résumé. As a result, the opportunity to engage in impression management can precede an initial face-to-face encounter (Swann 1983). When considering those factors that create an environment for people to engage in impression management (Ferris *et al.* 1994), two emerge that directly apply to résumé submission. According to Ferris *et al.* (1994) individuals are more likely to engage in impression management—in our present context, how they present identifying information on their résumé—when there is greater ambiguity and the value of the outcome is likely to be high. In this case, the expected value is

<sup>1</sup> The distinction drawn here is one commonly used in ethical analysis, namely, that between means and ends or between intention and the act itself. Different ethical theories vary in their respective emphases, with deontological frameworks focused on the means (e.g., Kant's elevation of "the good will") and with utilitarian thought focused on outcomes and the extent to which they maximize the good.

straightforward insofar as individuals believe that if they do not engage in such tactics, they will be less likely to advance in the selection process. Therefore, the cost of not engaging in impression management is the loss of advantage or standing in seeking employment and, quite possibly, loss of the position itself.

Typically a priori knowledge about applicants is low and thus ambiguity is relatively high in the résumé screening process. This sets the stage for applicants to engage in impression management and to consider the optimal means for self-presentation. The individuals involved—the job seeker and screener—do not generally communicate face-to-face during the screening process. As a result, the applicant does not have the opportunity to provide supplemental information nor does the potential employer have the chance to seek clarifications or explanations. So while the cost of deception might be high if detected, there is relatively little danger of an employer uncovering such a tactic in this early stage of the selection process.

### When Impression Management in Résumés Crosses the Ethical Line

Ethicists who have considered how individuals provide information in their résumés have focused more on issues of content than identification (Bishop 2006; Kidwell 2004; Marcoux 2006). This lack of focus on issues of identification represents an important gap in the literature that the present paper seeks to address. Although, the extant literature does not focus on identifying information, it is still valuable to examine how ethicists have treated related issues and consider how they apply to the current case.

Recent academic articles (Bishop 2006; Kidwell 2004; Marcoux 2006) have raised questions about the role of embellishment, which can be considered as a form of impression management when applied to résumés. Using a game theoretic framework, Marcoux has offered a “counterintuitive argument” that résumé embellishment as applied to non-verifiable information<sup>2</sup> is likely to contribute to positive outcomes for employment practices. Conversely, Kidwell firmly asserts that lying on résumés undermines organizational effectiveness and goals. Bishop takes a middle path recognizing that not all résumé embellishments are the same. The present authors concur with Bishop’s position but believe that his counter argument is still too limited to fully understand the complexities of the identity management issues being discussed. Still this current debate and analysis provides a valuable point of reference for understanding the complexity of the issue.

In his analysis of résumé embellishments, Marcoux focuses on the strategic manipulation of non-verifiable information. He also prefaces his analysis with the assumption that such behavior is already a widespread practice, which employers corroborate (Zupek 2007). Insofar as it represents an expected behavior, Marcoux asserts it is best for applicants and employers alike if all submitters embellish, because this creates an environment where it is both morally and prudentially acceptable.

The consequentialist tenor of this argument is clear: given certain simplifying assumptions, hiring outcomes are more likely to be beneficial than if the practice of embellishment gets unevenly applied. In other words, superior candidates are hurt if they don’t embellish and less qualified candidates embellish to the point that they appear to be

---

<sup>2</sup> Marcoux provides but a few examples of embellishment (p. 184). They seem likely to include such aspects as inflated titles, exaggerated job functions and overstated technical abilities, but plausibly extend into such areas as salary history and degree of foreign language fluency. The nature and extent of embellishment is an issue that Bishop (2006) considers more closely in his critique of Marcoux.

equivalent. In this case, the superior candidate is less likely to get a job offer. However, if embellishments are universal then the perceived ability of all candidates are raised by the same level<sup>3</sup> so the superior candidate maintains his or her comparative advantage and therefore will not face adverse employment outcomes.

Bishop disagrees with Marcoux's position on résumé embellishment and organizes his counter-arguments along two lines. First, the term embellishment is held up to closer examination by Bishop and found ultimately to be an expansive category that calls into question important issues of specification. Bishop considers how the application of embellishment varies in matters of kind and degree. To undertake embellishment is, in Bishop's view, to inescapably face the operational or tactical decision of "how much" to embellish. While a "bit of 'puffery'" is relatively innocuous, he holds that this could lead to a "spiral of embellishment," an imagined state of affairs that fails to pass ethical muster by either Kantian or consequentialist standards.

Additionally, Bishop imagines that such practiced deception would also have a cumulative corrosive effect on the perceived character of the embellisher. So not only does résumé embellishment undermine the system of résumé submission and evaluation, but also works at counter-purposes to the ultimate establishment of a good and productive employment relationship. The relationship between the employer and the employed, in order to achieve some measure of success, depends upon the fulfillment of expectations and promises made in the run-up to employment. Therefore, impressions and judgments formed before employment, insofar as they are confirmed or disconfirmed, will affect levels of trust, communication and other important determinants of productive employee–employer relations.

Kidwell takes an even stronger position in calling this type of behavior deviant and therefore unethical. In addition to adducing how such "lying" may undermine interpersonal relationships, he argues that such actions, upon their discovery, can negatively impact the organization's reputation. This hazard requires that human resource professionals be especially vigilant with regard to such deceptive stratagems. His analysis, however, is limited in that it focuses on two high profile cases of embellishing verifiable information. It is not clear whether the same negative consequences would occur for typical employees who embellish non-verifiable information.

A related situation occurs when information is omitted from a résumé. For Bishop, omissions of information are another matter and, on balance, less objectionable or problematic than are embellishments. He explains:

Withholding information is...usually acceptable. In many jurisdictions, one is legally permitted (or even required) to withhold information on one's age, race, marital status, medical condition and so on. If one is applying for a job as a manager in a corporation, omitting to mention one's PhD in philosophy is morally permitted and possibly advisable. (p. 182).

While he goes on to state that there are instances when omissions are ethically problematic, he fails to identify those except to say they are not generally considered embellishments. Although the lack of expansion or explanation may be understandable given the focus of both Bishop and Marcoux's work, it does represent a potential limitation of their analysis. Similarly, the dichotomy between verifiable and non-verifiable information that is shared by all three authors fails to capture some key tactics that applicants use in order to positively manage impressions to get an interview and job.

<sup>3</sup> Itself a strong assumption.

## Typology for Impression Management in Résumés

These existing perspectives on embellishment and what is known about the ways in which identifying information can appear or be withheld in résumés assisted in the creation of a typology to understand ethical concerns regarding impression management by job applicants. One factor to consider is the method through which the individual has communicated the information. People can influence perceptions of their identity through either assertions or omissions (Bennington and Wein 2002; Davis and Muir 2003; Kirby 2006). Assertions are attempts by an individual to clarify his or her identifying information and, in the process they work to facilitate certain inferences. Generally, this strategy would be viewed positively if, in fact, the individual's actual and projected identity are congruent (Swann *et al.* 2000). Conversely, someone who is using an omission strategy is withholding a specific piece of identifying information. As a result, there is a potential inconsistency between that person's actual and projected identity, which raises ethical concerns insofar as the absence of specific disclosures begs the question of both motivation and result—perhaps providing the occasion for deceit (Swann *et al.* 2000).

In seeking explanations for the selective provision or omission of self-identifying information, self-interest is expected to be the default explanation. The job applicant competes in a labor market and, other things equal, seeks to improve his or her relative position in the applicant pool. Tactics for doing this are likely to vary and may include such approaches as embellishment, artful descriptions of past positions and accomplishments, selective or strategic omissions, and outright lies. The application of these and other tactics may likely vary according to the inclination and intentions of the job candidates as well as the competitive intensity that surrounds the position and the related job market. In all cases, self-presentation is a determination that is as strategic as it is selective (Bennington and Wein 2002). The presentation of self in this market context becomes in part a positioning decision: How will the candidate attempt to be perceived relative to other candidates (both actual and imagined) for the same position? In this paper, we observe two broad motivating principles: to seek advantage or to seek parity along some perceived evaluative dimension. More specifically, is the person engaging in a given tactic to gain an advantage over others or is it to level the so-called playing field?

The two-by-two matrix created by the interaction of method (i.e., assertion versus omission) and motivation (i.e., advantage versus parity) generates a typology for understanding the impression management opportunities in résumé construction. The assertion of specific identifying characteristics can set one apart in a field of candidates or, alternatively, it can lend credence to an implicit claim to membership in a certain set or subset of applicants. These two possibilities are labeled “claiming exceptionalism” and “confirming typicality,” respectively. While the former can suggest the candidate is deserving of strong consideration with respect to some evaluative criterion, the latter is more intended to guard against preemptive elimination by a disjunctive decision rule that might be used to screen out candidates that do not apparently possess a desired characteristic or otherwise fail to provide sufficient evidence of some minimum requirement. Examples of these tactics are more fully developed in a subsequent section containing illustrative case vignettes.

Omissions of self-identifying information can similarly work to gain the applicant advantage or parity, but the dynamic here is expected to be substantially different than in situations where information is positively asserted. The implicit assumption in these situations is that were the identifying information provided, instead of being withheld, it would work against the self-interest of the job seeker. Or, to consider such omissions from

		Method	
		Assertion (specification of identity)	Omission (withholding of identity)
Motivation	Seeking Advantage	Claiming exceptionalism	Enhancing opportunity
	Seeking Parity	Confirming typicality	Equalizing opportunity

**Fig. 1** Typology of impression management tactics in résumés.

the perspective of the employer, the provision of this information could result in a negative evaluation (and for now we will withhold an evaluation as to whether such judgments on the part of the employer might be appropriate or not), thereby diminishing the attractiveness or suitability of the applicant. Anticipating this, an applicant may decide to withhold the information that would provoke the negative evaluation. Such tactics can be viewed as seeking an advantage as in the case of “enhancing opportunity” or an attempt to seek parity in instances of “equalizing opportunity”. Ethical considerations arising from this typology are developed more fully below. Suffice it for now to observe that in either making claims or withholding information in a résumé, questions are potentially provoked about the truthfulness of the assertions made or the fairness of selective omissions aimed at managing the impressions of the employer.

### Impression Management Vignettes

The authors have created six vignettes that help to ground the typology presented in Fig. 1 and provide a basis for further understanding the ethics of identity presentation in résumés. The authors developed the vignettes based on knowledge of actual situations and with the assistance of subject matter experts to help ensure realism and applicability. Each vignette focuses on a particular aspect of an applicant’s identity; the authors recognize that this is a simplification as each of us has multiple identities (e.g., race, sex, religion, etc...). Although we each have multiple identities, they will not be equally salient to employer decision-making during the résumé screening process. Further, the utilization of multiple impression management tactics would unduly complicate the explication of the typology, which is the main purpose of the vignettes. An analysis and discussion of the vignettes will follow their presentation.

#### Vignette #1: Family Heritage

Alex Summers was a thirty-five year-old executive at a diversified electrical products firm. Alex was of Hispanic decent, tracing this heritage through his mother, whose parents came

to the United States from Cuba many decades ago. Having been raised and educated in communities with small Latino populations, he has used Alex instead of his given name of “Alejandro.” As an adult, his single-minded focus on advancing his career at a rapid pace had taken Alex to assignments throughout the U.S. eventually landing him in Miami. Alex has learned that a large manufacturer of medical devices was hiring a new vice-president for business development. Alex also happened to know that the firm’s president was a leader in the Cuban-émigré community. Alex applied for the position, but took some pains to print a new copy of his résumé, replacing “Alex Summers” with “Alejandro Casañas Summers”—Casañas being his mother’s maiden name.

#### Vignette #2: Gender Norms

Ashley Monroe had always loved working with cars. After high school, Ashley decided to enroll in a technical school to become a mechanic. On the first day of class students were assigned to two-person teams for shop projects. Ashley’s partner read the list and announced to anyone who cared to listen that he didn’t want to work with “some girl.” He re-considered his statement when Ashley walked up and he discovered that Ashley had been an offensive tackle on the varsity football team. Ashley let him know that people usually just called him “Bull,” especially if they wanted to stay on his good side. When it came time to apply for jobs he realized that he couldn’t put “Bull” on an application but he did not want to use Ashley either. In the end, he decided to use A.J., which simply combined the initials of his first name Ashley and middle name Jean. The technical school also required graduating students to produce a résumé and he did likewise identifying himself as A.J. Monroe on it.

#### Vignette #3: Fresh Start

Marcia Stevens found herself back on the job market after a series of personal and career reversals. Although she had been one of the top graduates in her law school class ten years ago, she was looking to start a new job in sales. The career change was precipitated by a series of personal and professional problems that led to disbarment and divorce. She knew full well that both her disbarment and divorce were part of the public record. She had, on occasion, “Googled” her name and was confronted with notices, media reports, and other telltale evidence of this unfortunate period in her life. Feeling that a clean break was the best way to proceed with her life she went back to her maiden name Marcia Smith. While as Ms. Smith she wouldn’t be able claim her years of work experience but at least she wouldn’t have to explain the disbarment and other sordid details of her personal life.

#### Vignette #4: Color Blindness

While currently employed as an account executive at an advertising agency, Shanice Cooper decided to look for a new job. She updated her résumé and began circulating it to prospective employers. Unfortunately, despite her belief that she was fully qualified for several positions, a month later Shanice had yet to be called in for an interview. When she asked a friend to review her résumé, he said it looked great but mentioned how there was some research that showed applicants with African–American sounding names were less likely to receive an interview than were similarly qualified candidates with names that were “white-sounding” or otherwise did not offer clues as to racial identity. On her way home, she considered the issue and thought why not use the name Nicole? Although she was not



ordinarily called Nicole by her family, friends or acquaintances, Nicole was her middle name and she felt this provided her with some justification for appropriating it in this professional context.

#### Vignette #5: Extracurricular Activities

Edward Cross was scheduled to graduate with his bachelor's degree in accounting at the end of the spring semester. He looked forward to getting his career underway, perhaps as a consultant with one of the professional services firms that regularly interviewed on his campus. He had a solid, if not spectacular, academic record. But while in school, Edward had been active outside of the classroom and proven himself to be a capable student leader. In particular, he held several officer positions in the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Alliance. Edward had proven adept at organizing events, building membership and eventually providing recognition and leadership for his organization. As Edward put together his résumé that would be distributed to campus recruiters, he decided not to include these leadership positions or his membership in the Alliance. He was concerned that individual recruiters wouldn't feel comfortable hiring a "gay activist."

#### Vignette #6 Change of Pace

After 12 years of hard work with the same company, Sam Miller had finally been promoted to foreman. He enjoyed being a supervisor, so when the company closed a few years later he decided to go back to school so he could get a management job. While getting ready for campus recruiting, he was concerned how he would look relative to his classmates given the age difference. As it happened, someone mentioned a functional résumé to him—a technique where a strict chronological listing of one's job history is replaced with a format documenting or otherwise detailing the possession of relevant job-related skills by the applicant. At the cost of his work experience, he would appear almost 20 years younger on paper. Thinking it over, he felt the tradeoff, at least for campus recruiting, was worth it.

### Analysis

In order to facilitate an analysis of the ethical implications of the vignettes, the authors have organized them in Fig. 2 according to how the vignettes map onto the impression management typology. The analysis is divided along the columns of the figure because the standards used to assess the impression management tactics differ between assertions and omissions. To clarify this distinction, the authors have added an additional row to the figure. Specifically, ethical considerations of assertion tactics depend upon the authenticity or genuineness of the identity being asserted. By contrast, ethical considerations of omission rest upon the justice implications of the tactic. Therefore, the analysis will first explore the ethical implications of vignettes 1 (Alex/Alejandro) and 2 (A.J./Ashley Jean) as these are instances of assertions before addressing the remaining vignettes (3–6) which represent forms of omissions.

#### Assertions

As a general matter, we argue that the ethics associated with the assertion of some relevant piece of personal information that contributes to the specification of identity turns on the



		Method	
		Assertion (specification of identity)	Omission (withholding of identity)
Motivation	Seeking Advantage	#1 (Family Heritage) Alex/Alejandro Casanas Summers	#3 (Fresh Start) Marcia Stevens/Smith
	Seeking Parity	#2 (Gender Norms) A.J./Ashley John Monroe	#4 (Color Blindness) Shanice/Nicole Cooper  #5 (Extracurricular Activities) Edward Cross  #6 (Change of Pace) Sam Miller
Ethics Depends Upon		Authenticity of the assertion (Genuineness)	Warrant for the omission (Justice)

**Fig. 2** Assessing the vignettes.

genuineness or authenticity of that claim. A closely allied consideration, in this context, is the correctness or truthfulness of the beliefs that have in turn been based on this identifying information. Simply put, the key question becomes whether the inferences drawn by the employer are in fact accurate or not.<sup>4</sup>

Issues of authenticity have been recognized as an important factor in determining the acceptance and effectiveness of impression management tactics (Ferris *et al.* 2005, 2007). Ethical judgments of individuals engaging in impression management in résumés are expected to be more favorable when the identity presented is genuine. When apparent genuineness does not exist, observers are more likely to perceive that the individual is attempting to take unfair advantage of the situation by being misleading or manipulative (Sussman *et al.* 2002). This creates trust violations which have negative implications for both interpersonal relationships and organizational effectiveness (Day and Schoenrade 1997; DeJordy 2008; Swann *et al.* 2000).

Our case analysis begins with Alex/Alejandro. First, we assume that Alex's appearance offers no visual cue to undercut his implied ethnic claim. However, what does it mean for Alex to present himself as Alejandro? A likely assumption by a potential employer

<sup>4</sup> We observe a useful analogy available in the literature and regulation associated with deceptive advertising. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) observes a distinction between express claims (i.e., what the ad literally says) and implied claims (i.e., one made indirectly or by inference). Both express and implied claims can be deceptive and advertisers are required by law to have substantiation of them, if challenged by the FTC. Gardner (1975) in his work on deceptive advertising identifies three types of deceptive ads. In addition to the "unconscionable lie," there are other mechanisms in ads that deceive, including the claim-fact interaction, in which further information is required to avoid misleading inferences, and the claim-belief interaction in which information contained in the ad is literally correct, but might be reasonably expected to mislead the consumer.

(remember he is asserting his Cuban identity) is that he speaks Spanish. This information was left out of the vignette because its inclusion could shape a person's impression of his behavior. For example, an observer would be less likely to question the legitimacy of Alex using Alejandro on his résumé if he is fluent in Spanish. Conversely, if an employer was to learn that Alejandro did not speak Spanish he or she would be more likely to feel deceived or manipulated, an outcome that would not bode well for Alex's candidacy. This case demonstrates how the apparent genuineness of the identity utilized in a résumé has important implications for how observers and employers respond to the individual's impression management tactic.

Individuals "claiming exceptionalism" may find their claim subject to challenge or scrutiny if the underlying identity is itself questioned. Even if they do not explicitly lie, they have created a situation in which the false impression has been allowed to occur. For example, let us assume now that Alex/Alejandro does not speak Spanish. Even if he did not specifically list Spanish as one of his skills, the purposeful creation of a Latino identity would reasonably allow the employer to assume that he is a Spanish speaker. When the employer finds out that he does not speak Spanish the strict veracity of his claim to a Latino heritage is likely to matter less than the deception itself.

By contrast, in cases of "confirming typicality," the job seeker applies information in an effort to manage perceptions in a veridical direction or to avoid undesirable or inaccurate perceptions. The image that A.J. was attempting to create was a masculine one, and because he is, in fact, a male there is no discrepancy between the projected and actual identity. Even if it were subsequently disclosed in the employment relationship that A.J. stands for Ashley Jean or that he used to be known by the nickname Bull, this would most likely be fodder for some good natured ribbing, which would likely serve to build rather than undermine the relationship.

### Omissions

As a general ethical rule-of-thumb, the premeditated concealment of information is suspect.<sup>5</sup> Ethical principles such as transparency and full-disclosure are endorsed as effective remedies for such moral hazards as conflict-of-interest and deception. The burden of proof, so to speak, in these four vignettes (3 through 6) in which some aspect of identity is hidden requires a justification of the tactic. The pointed question is: What warrant exists for the withholding of information.

We identify two such warrants: one having to do with relevance and the other with prejudice. These factors differ in terms of an employer's right to have access to this information. In the case of "enhancing opportunity," the individual is omitting information that either directly or by extension (similar to the question of Alex/Alejandro speaking Spanish) conceals information that a potential employer has a right to know in order to make a proper employment decision. By contrast, the information omitted by those employing "equalizing opportunity" generally pertains to protected class status (in regard to U.S. civil rights legislation) or other non-job relevant information that a potential employer does not need or does not have a right to know when making employment decisions.

In vignette 3, we find Marcia Stevens/Smith seeking a fresh start. Her past marriage and any publicity that attended to its dissolution is most likely irrelevant to her future career

<sup>5</sup> Here again in its regulation of advertising, the FTC considers what the ad does not say, recognizing that the omission of information can mislead consumers.

plans and should not be a material consideration for a prospective employer. But, assuming her disbarment was with cause, her professional misconduct is relevant—her plans to abandon a legal career, notwithstanding. Similar to the case of Alex/Alejandro it is not the omission of the disbarment that is the key problem here. As previously stated, self-interest is the key motivator for the impression management tactics, so not including the information is somewhat understandable. People do not generally put negative information on their résumés, but this is qualitatively different than a “C” student who omits reporting his or her grade point average (GPA). In the case of GPAs, an employer can easily access that information, assuming the applicant is being truthful about his or her name and school (s) attended. By choosing to use her maiden name, Marcia raises an ethical question because she is obstructing the employer from accessing information regarding the disbarment, which an employer has a right to know when making a decision about whether to hire her.

Marcia’s use of her maiden name also contrasts with the withholding of basic identifying information in the remaining cases (vignettes 4, 5, and 6). In all three vignettes, information has been variously shaped or withheld, in order to minimize the occasion for negative evaluations based on non-job relevant information. All three applicants are alert, variously, to the prospect of discrimination connected to their race, sexual orientation or age. Their concern does not necessarily imply bad-faith on the part of any particular employer, but does reflect the recognition that such prejudice can assert itself indirectly and subconsciously and despite the best intentions of the decision-maker (Gladwell 2005). The classification for this group of three case vignettes, “equalizing opportunity,” suggests that the intention of the résumé-submitter is not to game the system or seek an unfair advantage, but rather to increase the likelihood of a fair determination. This résumé tactic carries a purpose similar to Rawls’s (1971) famous “veil of ignorance”, namely, to remove or otherwise neutralize considerations of positional advantage/disadvantage from the decision-makers purview and thus increase the likelihood that unbiased choice will support the ends of justice.

## Ethical Implications and Recommendations

The vignettes that were presented in this paper provide useful examples of how the proposed typology of impression management regarding identity in résumés would operate in practice. These examples show that individuals differ in both why they engage in the impression management and how they achieve it. The assessments of the impression management tactics reflect the fact that we live in an imperfect world and are not meant to be an endorsement of the societal biases and discriminatory decision-making that encourage their use.

Of course the selection process is not an isolated decision. Individuals need to realize that if they are successful in advancing in the selection process that they will need to live up to the identity that they have crafted in their résumé or risk appearing deceptive or manipulative. Picture the scenario that follows Sam’s (vignette 6) interview and the surprise the interviewer, who had been imagining a much younger man as suggested by the résumé, receives. Now consider whether Sam has really improved his outcomes by engaging in impression management. Although Shanice/Nicole and Mark (vignettes 4 and 5) are less likely to provide such a surprise at the interview, there are still long-term implications of their decision to engage in impression management. For example, if Nicole chooses to revert to being called Shanice in the workplace the employer or colleagues may consider

her use of Nicole on her résumé as deceptive or manipulative which would result in a trust violation that could undermine her position and relationships.

As for Mark, the implications of his being identified as gay provide additional complications as compared to the previous case concerning race. A key reason for this difference is the societal stigma associated with being gay or lesbian (Beatty and Kirby 2006; Boatwright *et al.* 1996; Day and Schoenrade 2000; Griffith and Hebl 2002; Ragins 2008; Ragins and Cornwell 2001). Further, in the United States there is a lack of federal protections against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation relative to other diverse groups (Beatty and Kirby 2006; Kaplan 2006). This increases the risks associated with asserting a gay or lesbian identity. Another important difference between diversity based on race versus sexual orientation is that the latter is considered invisible (Clair *et al.* 2005; Kaplan 2006; Kirby 2006) meaning that it generally requires disclosure by the individual for others to become aware of the identity. This combination of factors makes the decision to pass, that is to say, to appear to be a member of the majority group, an unavoidable consideration for gays and lesbians (Button 2004; DeJordy 2008; Fassinger 1996). Although the lack of legal protections and stigma increases the perceived necessity for engaging in passing strategies, members of all invisible diversity groups (e.g., members of religious minorities) confront this decision. As such, vignette 5 is generalizable to members of other minority groups.

The other cell of the typology where a trust violation is potentially an issue occurs in “claiming exceptionalism.” If the identity asserted by the job candidate is not genuine then an employer is likely to feel a sense of having been deceived similar to what has just been described for “equalizing opportunity.” Trust violations are not expected to have the same negative consequences when the impression management tactic is “enhancing opportunity” or “confirming typicality,” although for different reasons. While there is still a sense of betrayal in each case, the information uncovered for those engaging in “enhancing opportunity” is more likely to concern something that justifies ending the employment relationship, such as the disbarment in the vignette #3 with Marcia.. As there would not be a need to try to manage or repair the relationship it is less problematic. Conversely, the information asserted by those attempting to “confirm typicality” is consistent with the person’s authentic identity. As in the case of A.J., his authentic identity is that of a man so finding out his real name is Ashley is more likely to be the basis for mild amusement than a source of betrayal.

As for recommendations, the need and outcomes associated with these impression management tactics suggest courses of actions for both employers and job applicants. Applicants need to remember that it is not a casual decision to engage in impression management on their résumés. Short-term gains in résumé screening may create complications later on in the selection process or employment relationship. Therefore, individuals should carefully weigh the potential costs and benefits of such strategy before engaging in it.

For their part, employers need to become aware of their role in perpetuating the imperfect world that creates the perceived need for applicants to reconsider how they identify themselves on their résumés. One thing that organizations can do is to create a positive reputation that embraces diversity which encourages applicants to truthfully identify themselves in the selection process. While this will help reduce the situations illustrated by the vignettes in this paper it will not completely eliminate them, so these organizations will also need to make those who are responsible for résumé screening and hiring decisions to be more cognizant of their biases. Such interventions serve to reduce the

negative consequences of disclosure by making individuals more accountable for their decision-making (Ford *et al.* 2004).

## Conclusion

Women and minorities face discrimination in the hiring process and this can occur even before an applicant meets a prospective employer. Although résumés are facially neutral documents, enough identifying information appears through names and work related experiences that they create the potential for bias to enter the selection process. While we often focus on the discriminatory nature of these biases, in the case of similarity there is the potential for the bias to favor the individual. Therefore, applicants who have been made aware of this potential have the opportunity to engage in impression management in terms of how and why they identify themselves on their résumés.

The implications for the workplace seem twofold. From the employers perspective, insofar as organizations develop norms and expectations that align with the self-views of employees and prospective employees, then evidence suggests that identity negotiation will proceed along a path of stability and congruence, which in turn lead to better work performance (Swann 1987; Swann *et al.* 2000). Employees and prospective employees may, however, warily approach the prospect of identity change, although as our vignettes demonstrate, such tactics differ by such factors as the intention of the protagonist, the nature or extent of possible deception, the potential for verification, and the implications for the employment relationship. But this much seems clear, identity change—whether limited to a semantic presentation on a resume or implemented in the execution of a functional business role—can cause disruption, suspicion and mistrust, making social interaction more difficult. The assumption of a new identity, whether temporarily or permanently, will likely require accommodation at some level, which may itself be a distraction from work-related tasks. Therefore, applicants should use caution if the identity they selectively present tests the boundaries of honesty and fairness as this can undermine their efforts because of perceived trust and ethical violations.

## References

- Applebaum, S. H., & Hughes, B. (1998). Ingratiation as a political tactic: effects within the organization. *Management Decision*, 36, 85–95.
- Bart, B. D., Hass, M. E., Philbrick, J. H., Sparks, M. R., & Williams, C. (1997). What's in a name? *Women in Management Review*, 12, 299–308.
- Beatty, J. E., & Kirby, S. L. (2006). Beyond the legal environment: how stigma influences invisible identity groups in the workplace. *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal*, 18, 29–44.
- Bennington, L., & Wein, R. (2002). Aiding and abetting employer discrimination: the job applicant's role. *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal*, 14, 3–16.
- Bertrand, M., & Mullainathan, S. (2004). Are Emily and Greg more employable than Lakisha and Jamal? A field experiment on labor market discrimination. *The American Economic Review*, 94, 991–1013.
- Bishop, J. D. (2006). Moral intuitions versus game theory: a response to Marcoux on résumé embellishing. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 67, 181–189.
- Boatwright, K. J., Gilbert, M. S., Forrest, L., & Ketzenberger, K. (1996). Impact of identity development upon career trajectory: listening to the voices of lesbian women. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 48, 210–228.
- Button, S. (2004). Identity management strategies utilized by lesbian and gay employees: a quantitative investigation. *Group & Organization Management*, 29, 470–475.

- Clair, J. A., Beatty, J. E., & MacLean, T. L. (2005). Out of sight but not out of mind: managing invisible social identities in the workplace. *Academy of Management Review*, 30, 78–95.
- Davis, B. D., & Muir, C. (2003). Résumé writing and the minority student. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 66, 39–51.
- Day, N. E., & Schoenrade, P. (1997). Staying in the closet versus coming out: relationships between communication about sexual orientation and work attitudes. *Personnel Psychology*, 50, 147–163.
- Day, N. E., & Schoenrade, P. (2000). The relationship among reported disclosure of sexual orientation, anti-discrimination policies, top management support and work attitudes of gay and lesbian employees. *Personnel Review*, 29, 346–363.
- DeJordy, R. (2008). Just passing through: stigma, passing, and identity decoupling in the workplace. *Group and Organization Management*, 33, 504–531.
- Fassinger, R. E. (1996). Notes from the margins: integrating lesbian experience into the vocational psychology of women. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 48, 160–175.
- Ferris, G. R., Fedor, D. B., & King, T. R. (1994). A political conceptualization of managerial behavior. *Human Resource Management Review*, 4, 1–34.
- Ferris, G. R., Treadway, D. C., Kolodinsky, R. W., Hochwarter, W. A., Kacmar, C. J., Douglas, C., et al. (2005). Development and validation of the political skill inventory. *Journal of Management*, 31, 126–152.
- Ferris, G. R., Treadway, D. C., Perrewé, P. L., Brouer, R. L., Douglas, C., & Lux, S. (2007). Political skill in organizations. *Journal of Management*, 33, 290–320.
- Fletcher, C. (1992). Ethical issues in the selection interview. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 11, 361–367.
- Ford, T. E., Gambino, F., Lee, H., Mayo, E., & Ferguson, M. A. (2004). The role of accountability in suppressing managers' preinterview bias against African-American sales job applicants. *The Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, 24, 113–124.
- Gardner, D. M. (1975). Deception in advertising: a Conceptual Approach. *Journal of Marketing*, 39, 40–46.
- Gilmore, D. C., & Ferris, G. R. (1989). The effects of applicant impression management tactics on interviewer judgments. *Journal of Management*, 15, 557–564.
- Gilmore, D. C., Stevens, C. K., Harrell-Cook, G., & Ferris, G. R. (1999). Impression management tactics. In R. W. Eder & M. M. Harris (Eds.), *The employment interview handbook* (pp. 321–336). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Gladwell, M. (2005). *Blink: The power of thinking without thinking*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.
- Griffith, K. H., & Hebl, M. R. (2002). The disclosure dilemma for gay men and lesbians: "coming out" at work. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 87, 1191–1199.
- Howard, J. L., & Ferris, G. R. (1996). The employment interview context: social and situational influences on interviewer decisions. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 26, 112–136.
- Kaplan, D. M. (2006). Can diversity training discriminate? Backlash to lesbian, gay, and bisexual initiatives. *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal*, 18, 61–72.
- Kidwell, R. E. (2004). "Small" lies, big trouble: the unfortunate consequences of résumé padding from Janet Cooke to George O'Leary. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 51, 175–184.
- Kirby, S. (2006). American gay and lesbian student leaders' perceptions of job discrimination. *Equal Opportunities International*, 25, 126.
- Marcoux, A. M. (2006). A counterintuitive argument for résumé embellishment. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 63, 183–194.
- Ragins, B. R. (2008). Disclosure disconnects: antecedents and consequences of disclosing invisible stigmas across life domains. *Academy of Management Review*, 33, 194–215.
- Ragins, B. R., & Cornwell, J. M. (2001). Pink triangles: antecedents and consequences of perceived workplace discrimination against gay and lesbian employees. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 6, 1244–1261.
- Rawls, J. (1971). *A theory of justice*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Stevens, C. K., & Kristof, A. L. (1995). Making the right impression: a field study of applicant impression management during job interviews. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 80, 587–606.
- Sussman, L., Adams, A. J., Kuzmits, F. E., & Raho, L. E. (2002). Organizational politics: tactics, channels, and hierarchical roles. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 2002(40), 313–329.
- Swann, W. B., Jr. (1983). Self-verification: Bringing social reality into harmony with the self. In J. Suls & A. G. Greenwald (Eds.), *Psychological perspectives on the self*. Hillsdale: Erlbaum.
- Swann, W. B., Jr. (1987). Identity negotiation: where two roads meet. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 53, 1038–1051.
- Swann, W. B., Jr., Milron, L. P., & Polzer, J. T. (2000). Should we create a niche or fall in line? Identity negotiation and small group effectiveness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 79, 238–250.
- Zupke, R. (2007). Infamous Résumé Lies. At <http://www.careerbuilder.com/Custom/MSN/CareerAdvice/ViewArticle.aspx?articleid=1154&pf> (accessed June 5, 2008).

Copyright of *Employee Responsibilities & Rights Journal* is the property of Springer Science & Business Media B.V. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.