

# VALIDATION OF SELF-PRESENTATION: THEORY AND FINDINGS FROM LETTERS OF APPLICATION FOR EMPLOYMENT

Anat Rafaeli and Alona Harness

## ABSTRACT

*We examine letters of application for employment as instances of individual self-presentation, and find a new strategy that we label self-validation. The strategy is used by self-presenters to convince target persons that desirable identity claims are true. A first, inductive study of 418 job application letters identifies conceptually distinct sources that letters writers call upon to complete the argument “My claims about merit are true because . . .” Sources are self-report, other people, external indicators, evidence of achievement, previous roles, and performance in similar situations. Two additional studies provide evidence on the use of the strategy and its effects on a target audience. The strategy of self-validation can be used in any self-presentation context in which actors seek to convince a judgmental audience about a desired identity and provides a conceptual contribution to theory and research on impression management.*

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The act of presenting ones' self to others is a routine and essential component of social behavior. When the goal of this act is to create a particular impression of the self upon an audience, it is referred to as *self-presentation* and has been argued to comprise impression management (Schlenker, 1985). Self-presentation may be intended at confirming one's concept of one's self, a process that has been described as 'self-verification' (cf. Swann & Hill, 1982; Swann, 1985) and self-affirmation (cf. Steele, 1988). In such cases additional participants may exist, but psychologically the target is the individual actor him or herself. Our focus here, however, is on cases where individual actions are clearly directed at the impressions formed by *other* people.

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correct?

Such self-presentation efforts continuously occur in applications for employment, as job applicants who want to be considered for a position present themselves to organizations. Such presentations must be **preformed** in a way that will ensure a certain image in the eyes of their audience. Hence, the context of a job search is a good arena for the investigation of the general social phenomenon of self-presentation where the impressions formed by others is critical. Research on self-presentation of job applicants has mostly focused on the employment interview (cf. Gallios, Callan & McKenzie Palmer, 1992; Harris, 1989; Kacmar, Delery & Ferris, 1992; Rynes, 1992; Stevens & Kristof, 1995). Yet a critical element that precedes the interview is often the currently understudied written letter of application for employment (cf. Feldman & Kilch, 1991; Knouse, 1989; Knouse, Giacalone & Pollard, 1988). This letter is a real life instance of self-presentation, and is the data used in this study.

The conceptual context of this study is an unresolved debate in discussions of self-presentation regarding the meaning of the self that is presented in social interactions (Schlenker, 1985). Some scholars assume that the presented self is designed to fit the appropriate circumstances, but that it nevertheless usually represents an individual's genuine or 'real' self, (cf., Schlenker, 1980; Schlenker & Weigold, 1992). This view pertains to application letters assuming that the self presented in a letter is basically valid. In this vein Yate claims that writing a resume is like sculpting: the complete information an applicant has of him or herself is like a block of stone, at which he or she has to chip in order to "reveal the masterwork that has been hiding there all along" (1995, p. 28). This perspective builds on the early observation by James (1890) that people have as many 'selves' as there are audiences that they encounter. Along these lines job applicants are advised to prepare multiple versions of their biographic history, to meet different requirements of different jobs (e.g. Brown & Campion, 1994; Donaho & Meyer, 1976; Yate, 1995).

In contrast, self-presentation can be seen as including pretense or even deceit, and questions can be raised regarding the truthfulness of claims made in various

application materials. Such questions have led scholars and practitioners to try to weed out individuals' attempts to present themselves as something they are not (e.g. Becker & Colquitt, 1992; Herman, 1994; Kluger, Reily & Russell, 1991; Stokes, Hogan & Snell, 1993; Yate, 1990).

Schlenker and Weigold's (1992) analysis of these different perspectives defined the first view as expansive and the second as restrictive. The labels refer to the nature and scope of self-presentation phenomena. The second, restrictive view links efforts to control the provision of information to specific individual goals such as power or rewards. The assumption here is that self-presentation occurs only under specific conditions or is employed primarily by certain types of people (cf. Jones & Pittman, 1982; Snyder, 1987). Management of information about the self is viewed as manipulation of social interactions. In the first expansive view, the catering of the self presented to particular audience is an integral part of the establishment of a social scene. Here the assumption is that since two people are involved a self-presentation process is essential and constitutes the 'drama' of everyday life (Brissett & Edgely, 1990), in which individuals play their roles or 'set the stage' for interpersonal interactions. The perspective has, accordingly, been labeled dramaturgical. Goffman (1959) argued that variations in self-presentation help people comprehend social interactions by defining what participants can expect of each other.

In this logic, control of information about the self represents actors' choices about the nature of social interactions they want to maintain (see also Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Schlenker, 1980). Selective presentation of information in applications for employment can be viewed accordingly as attempts to facilitate future interactions with a potential employer. The utilitarian aspect to this self-presentation, of attempting to make a positive impression on a target person, is but a vehicle toward convincing the target of the self-presentation (a potential employer). The expansive perspective therefore recognizes job applicants' need to establish an interaction with a potential employer who reads the letter (Swann, 1985; Rosenfeld, Giacalone & Riordan, 1995). Selective self-presentation is recognized fuels this process.

In prevailing analyses of self-presentation in organizations, Tedeschi and Melburg (1984) further discuss selective self-presentation as varying along the dimensions of assertiveness and timeliness. In their analysis, *assertive* self-presentation is behavior initiated by an actor in the interest of creating a desired identity, such as intimidating others to generate an image of power. *Reactive* or defensive self-presentation is intended at repairing potentially damaging self images, such as noting excuses or justifications for an undesirable negative situation. Schlenker and Weigold (1992) and Rosenfeld and colleagues (1995) offer similar distinctions between acquisitive and protective styles and attributive versus repudiative

styles, respectively. Timeliness of self-presentation, in Tedeschi and Melburg's (1984) analysis can vary from tactical to strategic. *Tactical* self-presentation addresses a specific target audience and is intended at achieving concrete, short term goals, such as getting a job interview or a job offer. *Strategic* self-presentation is intended at building a certain reputation, such as developing an image of a competent person. This reputation is desired because it can enable actors to achieve future goals, in different situations or with different target audiences. Importantly, in all these cases the target of the impression is another person, rather than the individual him or herself, who is the target in analyses of Swann and Hill (1982) and Steele (1988). While the two notions may in some way be connected, there are also dynamics that pertain

In this typology, letters of application for employment seem to be assertive and tactical self-presentation efforts since letters are written toward the specific, relatively short term and pro-active goal of getting to an interview or receiving a job offer. In any case such letters are an excellent medium for the exploration of self-presentation in natural (rather than laboratory) settings. They provide an unobtrusive view into real life self-presentation. The process of writing an application letter and sending it to a prospective employer is part of the routine flow of interaction between individuals and organizations (cf. Martin & Langhorne, 1994). Yet, the image advanced in such letters can be expected to be carefully crafted because the impressions letters make pertain to specific and important goals that are mediated by the target audience. The goal is getting to a job interview or getting a job offer, and the target audience is the reader of the letter. Self-presenters in letters do not have access to their audience beyond the letter, so in studying letters we can explore self-presentation that does not promise immediate or unintentional feedback to senders, yet does entice a genuine interest in self-presenters in inspiring a desirable image. This combination poses what Jones and Pittman (1982) described as "the self presentation predicament:" the self-presenter may be perceived as dishonest, yet doesn't have the opportunity to disclaim such perceptions. Writers face a dilemma of how to convince others (a potential employer) that the claims made in a letter are valid (cf. Mailloux, 1982; Scott, 1994).

Conceptually this dilemma is critical because it represents the conflict between the "restrictive" and "expansive" perspectives on self-presentation regarding the claims that can be considered legitimate in a self-presentation incident. In the expansive perspective, most if not all claims made by a self-presenter are legitimate; the restrictive perspective allows for a rather limited set. Yet, this conflict between the theoretical perspectives may be a conflict between sides to an interaction. An applicant's (actor's) perspective may espouse a flexible (expansive) self-presentation style that adapts to the target of the letter, because this style may be assumed to facilitate future interactions. In contrast, an

employer (target person) is more likely to embrace a more restrictive perspective, because employers need to discontinue many interactions with potential employees, to select only a few with whom to continue the interaction. This screening chore can encourage readers to maintain the more restrictive view that challenges claims made by self-presenters.

This tension between the predicaments of the two participants in a self-presentation episode is the back-drop to our study. The two perspectives on impression management are assumed in our analysis to represent two ends of a communication episode, senders and receivers. Senders interested in continued interaction with receivers are expected to adopt an expansive approach that will provide maximum freedom in preparing the message. Receivers, on the other hand, are assumed to maintain a critical and more restrictive approach to facilitate the screening of messages and the elimination of undesired social interaction. The broad question we examine is whether and how the tension is manifest in self-presentation efforts of senders, who in this case are writers of letters of application for employment. Our focus is on self-presentation of relatively abstract or vague notions such as skills, abilities, and dispositions since these aspects of the self do not come with a clear or customary terminology and pose a self-presentation challenge. For example, how does one convince a potential employer to trust assertions about enthusiasm, creativity, or effectiveness? Our analyses examine this challenge.

In three empirical studies of letters of application for employment, we reveal variations of self-presentation behaviors and explore their influence on a target audience. The fact that the situation we study does not allow immediate feedback to self-presenters allows us to “freeze” a specific self-presentation interaction – the letter – without intruding into it. Yet, our findings can be generalized to other situations in which an actor perceives him or herself as being tested by a critical and judgmental audience.

Our findings suggest a set of conceptually and empirically distinct tactics that help self-presenters validate their self-presentation claims to a critical target audience. The tactics capitalize on a variety of sources, but share the structure of “my claims are true because . . .” This structure is argued to help self-presenters (e.g. letter writers) convince targets (readers of the letter) that the image they claim (about themselves) is true. The first, theory building, study builds on an inductive content analysis of a set of letters and demonstrates the self-validation tactics and their variations. A second study then examines the extent and nature of use of the different tactics. The third study confirms the generalization of the theory of self-validation by documenting its applicability to a different organizational context, and by documenting a relationship between the strategy and successful self-presentation (i.e. being invited to a job interview).

## METHOD

### *Overview*

In three interrelated studies we examined several samples of letters of application for employment. The studies examine real-life letters written and sent by individuals applying for employment in response to employment ads that appeared in major newspapers in central Israel. All ads appeared in a Friday newspaper, since Friday is the most common employment advertising day in Israel. The first two studies examined letters received by one employer, in response to six ads posted by this employer during the summer of 1989. The third study examined letters received by a different employer in response to six ads that appeared during the fall of 1994.

Our working definition of an “*application letter*” comprised *any and all materials contained in an envelope in which an applicant conveys his or her interest in an employment opportunity*. We assumed that each letter was an individual occurrence of self-presentation, or what Goffman (1959) would call an individual performance in a weak situation of applying for employment. Some previous research differentiated between a resume and a cover letter (c.f. Donaho & Meyer, 1976), but both practical and conceptual considerations led us to combine them into the construct of “letter of application for employment.” Practically, we could not differentiate between the two parts of many applications, because many applicants failed to make this distinction (see below). Conceptually, we were interested in the complete richness of information and variations of self-presentation, so confining our analyses to any single part of a letter could have led to a significant loss of information.

### *Informed Consent*

Some of the individuals who wrote the letters we studied were hired. But we received all the letters only *after* the screening and selection process had been completed. We had no interaction with the hiring organizations regarding individual applicants. Names and other identifying information were erased from all letters to maintain anonymity and avoid breach of confidentiality. The findings presented here were presented to the managers involved only after the screening decisions had been made. Hence the study did not in any way inform or influence the screening and selection process, bore no influence on the hiring decisions, and had no effect on what letter writers experienced. Although we could not obtain informed consent from each applicant, the procedures of the study did not generate any risk whatsoever for applicants. The process was

therefore consistent with the ethical standards set by the *American Psychological Association* (1982, p. 39).

## **STUDY I: IDENTIFYING SELF-VALIDATION TACTICS**

### *Sample*

Study I examined 418 application letters received by a small manufacturer in central Israel that was looking to fill three positions – a sales representative, a marketing person and an administrative assistant. Letters varied in length from one page (42.30%) to 8 pages (0.72%) with a mean and median length of 2 pages, and a mode of 1 page. Some applicants separated between the resume and letter (32.5%), and some (9.4%) appended materials other than a personal letter or a resume (e.g. letters of recommendations or test results). Such additions ranged in length from 1 to 7 pages, with an average of 2.4 pages, median of 2 pages and mode of 1 page. Most applications (64.9%) were completely handwritten, some (24.7%) contained both a typed and a handwritten component (the resume was typically typed), while only a few (10.8%) were fully typed.

Most applications (61.2%) were for an office manager position, the remainder split between a sales representative position (23.4%), and a marketing position (15.3%). Demographically, a third (31.2%) of the writers were female, 68.8% were male, with most females (82.3%) applying for the office manager position. Males applied evenly to the administrative (51.6%) and the sales and marketing (48.4%) positions. Level of education of the writers varied from high school education, with or without a diploma, to a university MA degree, but the median and mode was a high school education. Age of writers varied from 22 to 62 (mean age 36, median age 34).

### *Data Analysis*

Data analysis in Study I involved an iterative, inductive process as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss and Corbin (1990). The goal of this qualitative process was to identify patterns of self-presentation unique to a context such as an application for employment, in which the burden of proof (of a writer's claims) is on the self-presenter. Letters in the sample were read and re-read a large number of times by both authors, yielding a constant refinement in an emergent framework. Our goal in this study was exploratory. We therefore did not distinguish between letters for different positions, but rather considered the complete set of letters our source of insight for theory

development. The decision to *not* examine intra-sample differences was also supported by the similarity of descriptors included in the ads that invited the studied letters. The data analysis process comprised three distinct, though tightly interrelated phases:

*Phase I: Searching for Themes.* First, we scanned all letters and searched for components of, or themes related to self-presentation. Initially the search was for any self-presentation issues, not uniquely self-validation. Hence this phase generated a long list of notes that included irreverent assertions (e.g. “people write on different quality of paper,” or “people separate their resume from the letter”) as well as more intriguing themes (e.g. “people talk of how other people view them.”). Some of these themes easily fit into well-established frameworks of impression management (e.g. Schlenker, 1981; Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984; Tedeschi & Norman, 1985), essentially validating these frameworks. However these frameworks did not seem to capture additional themes apparent in our data, warranting our analysis of these themes, which we assumed are related to the special tensions of self-presentation in situations such as applications for employment.

*Phase II: Organizing the Themes into a Coherent Conceptual Framework.* Next, we searched for a conceptual structure to integrate those observations in the first phase that did not seem represented in current frameworks of impression management. Our goal here was to articulate a parsimonious framework that describes how the special needs of self-presentation in an inherently ambiguous situation such as employment application are managed. This phase combined brainstorming with additional scanning of data. Here again our analysis repeatedly referred to current frameworks of impression management (e.g. Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984; Tedeschi & Norman, 1985). However these frameworks did not seem to address self-presenters’ concern regarding the validity of their claims. As a result we decided that our analysis suggests a new thesis, which is the core thesis of this paper: *That the risk that self-presentation claims be suspected is managed in a validation process in which writers call upon various sources for supporting the claims they make about their self.*

*Phase III: Differentiating Between Conceptually Distinct Themes.* Within the overarching framework, our continued reading of letters suggested distinct variations of self-validation efforts. A final phase in Study I identified these variations, and led to the identification of a set of conceptually distinct *sources* called upon to validate identity claims. Given our assumption that all sources were called up to advance a common goal of validation, calling up these sources



was viewed as using different *tactics of validating merit claims*. At the end of this phase we therefore identified six tactics and identified quotes from letters that illustrate each of the tactics.

## **FINDINGS: SIX SELF-VALIDATION TACTICS**

Letters of application contain two broad categories of information: relatively objective information, such as age or level of education, and relatively subjective information such as personal attributes. This distinction between objective, verifiable information and subjective, more fluid information, has been recognized by other authors (Becker & Colquitt, 1992; Mael, 1991; Stokes et al., 1993). Our findings revealed, however, that the two types of information engage different self-presentation strategies. Self-presentation of more objective attributes engages accepted conventions of vocabulary and style. By using accepted terminology (e.g. "I am 32 years old," "I have a BA"), writers can present themselves to a target audience in a fashion that appears reliable and trustworthy. In contrast, self-presentation of more subjective attributes (e.g. having initiative) is more complicated because an audience can more easily challenge claims. Our analyses capture a set of tactics that help manage this complexity.

Our findings suggest that letter writers (self-presenters) are aware that claims regarding subjective attributes may be doubted; this awareness, we argue, leads them to engage ways to validate their claims. When claims made about the self are abstract, additional validation is deemed desirable for two reasons: (1) to ensure that the audience understands the subjective notions presented in the desired fashion; and (2) to make sure that various claims are trusted. In both cases, the goal is the impression the claims leave on a target person, hence the dynamic depicted is conceptually distinct from self-affirmation (Steele, 1988) or self justification (Chatman, Bell & Staw, 1986). The process may be one of applicants seeking legitimacy for their claims and presenting alternative arguments in this search.

An (unstated) assumption in an application for employment is that subjective attributes (e.g. being smart or motivated) are important. But the precise meaning of these attributes is not always clear. Applicants seek ways to enhance the likelihood that their claimed merit on such attributes will be trusted so that they will be given further consideration in the screening process. The validation efforts are one such way. Suchman (1995) describes legitimization efforts at the organizational level of analysis. Our analysis contributes the idea that legitimization efforts also occur at individual levels, through the provision of validation information.

The goal of the validation efforts is to convince readers that the writer's merit claims are true. Merit can be indicated through attributes that are highly relevant to the specific job at hand (e.g. being organized for an administrative job), attributes relevant to a wide range of jobs (e.g. being a motivated employee), or generally desirable attributes (e.g. being a responsible person). The particular merit asserted is not the focus of our study, however, but rather, the attempt to validate claims to this merit. As summarized in Table 1 this study identified six sources of validation that self presenters called upon to back-up assertions of subjective merit: *Self-report, important others, "objective" indicators, previous achievements, previous roles, and performance in similar situations*. The six validation tactics all make an implicit argument that "*My claims about merit are true because . . .*" calling upon distinct sources to complete this argument.

The different tactics vary in the entities that they implicitly or explicitly involve in the self-presentation scene: The simplest (first) tactic involves only the letter writer. Consequent tactics call in other people (e.g. former supervisors), various agencies (e.g. psychological testing institutes), or various jobs (e.g. noted results, or roles performed). The most complex (sixth) tactic involves the self-presenter, other situations in which he or she performed, and the currently desired role. The tactics also vary in objectivity, which is the extent to which the writer relies upon a source whose evidence can be viewed as impartial, or the extent to which the evidence reported by the source is public and hence objectively verifiable. To illustrate, results of psychological tests (third tactic) can be viewed as more objective than self-report in that an external and impartial agency – the testing institute – is involved.

Nonetheless, together the six tactics depict the spectrum of resources available to self-presenters in the overall strategy of validating identity claims. The strategy is argued to be a way of overcoming potential suspicion and legitimating one's candidacy for a position. In describing the six tactics in the next section our overarching assertion is that they provide self-presenters a way to lead targets (readers) to trust assertions made in a self-presentation scene.

#### *Self-Report as a Validation Tactic*

A first, and least objective tactic, entails an applicant declaring him or herself as validation of being qualified to fill the position in question. In the frame of the general argument ("My claims about merit are true because . . ."), applicants drawing upon this tactic essentially say: "*My claims about merit are true because . . . I say so.*" For example, an applicant for the sales representative's position argued:

**Table 1.** Validation Tactics in Application Letters.

Validation Source	Implicit argument	Entities in the self-presentation scene	Example from data
<b>Self report</b>	“My claims about merit are true because . . . I say so.”	Self-presenter.	“My personal dispositions, the communication skills I have and my professional attitude toward sales promotion and the selling process, combine to a mature energy and to my motivation to succeed.”
<b>Important others</b>	“My claims about merit are true because . . . an important person (such as my previous manager) says so.”	Other people.	“My references, which I can make available if you request, can confirm and provide information about my ability and motivation.”
<b>External indicators</b>	“My claims about merit are true because . . . an authorization says so.”	Other agencies.	“The results of up to date psychometric tests are stored at a vocational institution.”
<b>Evidence of achievement</b>	“My claims about merit are true because . . . I have had successful accomplishments in the past. This success indicates my merit.”	Evident results.	“Because of my success in sales and advertising, I was sent to a marketing and advertising course – an intensive course, which for me was a promotion in the area of advertising and sales.”
<b>Previous roles</b>	“My claims about merit are true because . . . I have performed a particular role. This role indicates my merit.”	Other roles.	“This job required high abilities in organizing and executing ability, high administrative ability and good human relations.”
<b>Performance in similar situations</b>	“My claims about merit are true because . . . I (successfully) performed in a situation similar to the desired role.”	Other situations; Desired role.	“[I was a] deputy commander of officer training . . . a non-easy administrative job [similar to the job you advertised].”

My abilities and experience, as detailed in my commercial resume enclosed, allow me to accept the offered job and perform it, according to all the demands listed, maintaining a high professional level (#384).

In another example, an applicant for the same position stated:

I apply for this job because I have the personal knowledge, the right attitude and the vast experience needed to succeed in promoting the sales of your product, working with enthusiasm and love around the clock, I could serve your cause faithfully (#401).

In an extreme variation of this strategy, a self-presenter not only describes himself, but also offered his audience a self-validating conclusion – that the search for the ‘right’ applicant is complete. Before detailing his qualifications this applicant opened his letter with the following note:

I am a systems analyst and marketing person. Or, have you found the person you are looking for? (#232).

The remainder of this letter mentioned the applicant’s qualifications. But readers of the letter presumably considered these qualifications in light of the earlier validation of the appropriate conclusion – that no one is more qualified than this candidate.

Reliance on self-report for validation is the simplest tactic, in that only one agent – the writer – is involved. The remaining tactics introduce additional actors to the self- presentation scene. Self-report is therefore the least objective strategy, since an applicant is relying upon him or herself to validate his or her own identity claim. Self-report can be perceived as somewhat biased, both because of a clear interest on behalf of the writer, and because of writers’ unconscious self-deception that can lead to favorable self-concepts (Greenwald, 1980; Zerbe & Paulhus, 1987).

#### *Important Others as a Validation Tactic*

In a second tactic, writers implicitly involve “important others” (e.g. previous managers) in the self-presentation episode. The tactic involves what these people have to say about a self-presenter’s claims as a way of validating these claims. In the frame of the general argument, (“My claims about merit are true because . . .”), individuals using this tactic are claiming: “*My claims about merit are true because another important person says so.*” The assumption maintained in this tactic is that ‘important people’ such as a previous manager are legitimate participants to add to a job application scene because they are highly relevant to the employment context. The specific set of other people introduced may vary, but they are always assumed to be of importance to the context at hand.

This tactic comprises several versions: A first, simplest version entails mentioning the availability of references, such as when writers merely note in their letter “References available” or “I will provide names of references upon request.” This version could be made somewhat more convincing by including a specific name and phone number of references. The implicit assumption behind this version is that the mention of the availability of references will lead a reader to trust that the applicant possesses desirable attributes because there is another individual who can validate it.

A second variant of this (second) tactic entails physically enclosing a letter of reference with the application letter. A validating enclosure may be a formal letter of recommendation. The following note, for example, was attached by an applicant for the sales position:

We certify that [x] fulfilled all her tasks with devotion and expressed responsibility, initiative, and involvement. Independent in her work, she has the ability to work in a team and good human relations.

A validating enclosure may also be informal, such as the following personal note attached by an applicant for the office manager position:

I want to thank you for the nice way in which you manage the office and the day to day operation of the company, and especially for the effort you invested in preparing our trips. As a token of appreciation, I award you a weekend for two at a hotel of your choice (and if you don't have a baby-sitter, take the kids as well). HAVE FUN! (#280; emphasis in original).

The applicant who attached this note seems to assume that it validates her claims of merit.

Relying solely on the second tactic runs the risk of leaving the exact nature of the attributes that the self-presenter holds unstated. Perceptions of this risk may lead to a combination of this tactic with the first tactic, wherein the mention of references may follow a self-report of traits and attributes. For example, the following two applicants for the office manager position both combined the second tactic of calling up reports from important others with the first tactic of self-report:

- (1) In my current employment I certainly prove high administrative and organizational ability, and my superiors can testify to that (#46).
- (2) Recommendations about my good negotiating ability you can get from two service suppliers with whom I worked in the past. Mr. [X] the marketing manager of [Company A] and Mr. [Y] manager at [Company B] (#398).

The first quote merely mentions available sources upon which the writer *could* draw. The second explicitly identifies these references. These two quotes

illustrate how external references and self-report can be combined. In both cases writers appear to offer targets information that can curtail suspicions of dishonest claims. As the following applicant for the office manager position noted, a letter of recommendation can “speak for itself” in validating a self presentation claim:

I have the experience, knowledge, and ability in all the areas required, and enclosed is a letter of reference that speaks for itself, and can testify to that (#64).

The evidence of another person can be argued to be more objective than self-evidence. Yet, this tactic cannot be considered completely objective, since the person being presented selected the reference person. Moreover, reference letters are not really objective because writing a letter of recommendation is an opportunity for indirect self-presentation wherein writers may write glorious recommendations that enhance their image through the association with the individual being recommended (Cialdini & Richardson, 1980; Knouse, 1989). Objectivity is particularly limited when the second tactic is combined with the first tactic of self-report.

#### *External Indicators as a Validation Tactic*

A third validation tactic involves formal documents, figures or other authorizations that can be seen as pertaining to, and can therefore appear to validate claims regarding an applicant’s virtues. An authorization can contain direct descriptions of an applicant’s attributes, or provide reason for inferences about attributes. Examples of external indicators evident in our data included grade sheets, reports of psychological tests or evidence of succeeding in a screening procedure. Compared to the first two tactics, the use of such indicators reflects a greater effort on behalf of an applicant to offer objective validation of identity claims. In the frame of the general argument, (“My claims about merit are true because . . .”), applicants using this tactic are saying: “*My claims about merit are true because there is a formal authorization that says so.*” This tactic is also more complex in that a new agency is involved in the self-presentation episode: The agency providing the external indicators. The psychological testing agency or the institution from which a diploma or a grade sheet were obtained is implicitly included in the self-presentation scene.

Validating through external indicators also comprised two versions. A first version is simply a mention that such indicators are available. The following writer applying for the office manager position insinuates that the availability of scores of psychological tests at a professional institution can validate her merit:

The results of up to date psychometric tests are stored at a vocational institution, and I can release them to anyone who requests (#11).

A second version entails physically enclosing an authorization. To illustrate, an applicant for the marketing position enclosed a report of his performance in a battery of selection tests, and noted “Enclosed is the summary of a suitability test for the position of marketing manager prepared by [a vocational institute]” (#220).

The tactic of mentioning an external indicator can be combined with self-report (the first tactic), by interpreting the indicator. To illustrate, an applicant for the office manager position noted “According to psychological and graphological tests I recently took, I have a high and complete fit to the areas of administration and organization” (#4).

In another example of a combination of the first and third tactic an applicant included a time card with the application. The card revealed very long hours of work, and the writer argued that her willingness to maintain long and unusual hours of work validates her dedication and diligence. As both these examples illustrate, the third tactic may be more objective than the first two in the sense that it comprises external and quantifiable data, but its objectivity can be moderated by the personal involvement of the self-presenter in reporting these data.

#### *Evidence of Achievements as a Validation Tactic*

In a fourth tactic, applicants call upon accomplishments to validate their merit. This tactic builds on the assumption that evidence of achievements will lead readers to infer the existence of underlying qualities, because only such qualities can lead to such achievements. In the frame of the general statement (“My claims about merit are true because . . .”), applicants using this tactic are saying: “*My claims about merit are true because I have been successful in the past. This success indicates my merit.*”

A first version of this tactic builds upon visible results of one’s work as indicators of skills and abilities. A prominent example of this version is the applicant who noted “The sales established during the first four months of my work were in the sum of \$125,000. This is my proven experience in sales” (#409). This applicant explicitly provides the reader objective, measurable results to validate his merit. More detailed descriptions of qualifications are implicitly assumed by him to be unnecessary. A second version of this tactic mentions awards or bonuses granted by previous employers or scholastic institutions. To illustrate an applicant for the marketing person’s position told the potential employer “I was sent by the company for a four-months course that was held in Britain.”

A third version of this tactic describes one’s promotions noting accomplishments along the way. Accomplishments can be implied, as illustrated by the following excerpt from an application to the marketing person’s position:

I started working in a full time job in the (bank) in (city). There I started as a supervisor of the investments of (clients), within the bank's international unit. After about a year I was promoted, because I excelled in my job, and became supervisor of the international credit cards department (#226).

A description of promotions also allows explicit references to multiple accomplishments at multiple career steps. For example, the following applicant mentioned one piece of evidence (the reduction of non-collectable debts), and continued with a second piece of evidence (a promotion) that were accomplished at different promotion steps

I started as an assistant accountant . . . At the end of the first year the lost debts diminished and approached zero. By the end of the second year, I was promoted to the position of 'accountant' and operational assistant to the president (#316).

This, fourth tactic is more objective than the first (self-report) and second (important others) tactics, since it relies upon a real-life occurrence which is usually visible (e.g. money earned, bonus granted or achieved promotion), and hence verifiable. Like the third tactic it can be presented in a more or less objective manner, depending on the personal involvement of the writer (self-presenter). In the following example a self-presenter involved herself in reporting her achievements. By trying to explicate the inference she is seeking she somewhat moderated the objectivity of her self-presentation:

The increase of my job from a part time job, for which I was first accepted, to a full time job could testify to the satisfaction of my employers, since they were the ones who pressured me to work more and went above and beyond customary, as long as I would work as much as I could more (#126).

#### *Previous Roles as a Validation Tactic*

A fifth tactic involved describing an individual's previous roles to validate his or her merit. Implicitly relying on role theory, this tactic connects between role expectation and the merit of the individual performing the role (Katz & Kahn, 1978). The assumption underlying this tactic seems to be that a role description is more objective than self-description, perhaps because it is detached from the person occupying the role. In the frame of the general argument ("My claims about merit are true because . . ."), applicants are saying: "*My claims about merit are true because I have performed a particular role. The characteristics of the role confirm my merit claims.*"

In a first version of this tactic applicants provided descriptions of previous or current jobs in a way that indicated their own qualities. The following two examples illustrate how applicants for the office manager's position described



the jobs they held in terms of the personal qualities required from the person occupying these roles

- (1) I have experience in an advertising and tourism office as an office manager and production assistant. This job required high skills of organizational and administrative ability, team-work, good human relations, initiative, responsibility, and routine office administration (#28).
- (2) From (year) until (year) I worked at (company) as the general manager's secretary . . . A job which became in time more representative and organizational. Very responsible, very dedicated even after the end of the day, something that required thoroughness, loyalty and sincerity (#20).

These statements can be viewed as elaborate self-report, in which the writers articulate a first person declaration "I am a person with high abilities." They can also be viewed as a third person statement claiming "I have performed a role that required a person with high abilities". The difference in focus is crucial, however. It is less legitimate for a person to provide evidence about him or herself than it is to describe a previous job or experience (Jones & Pittman, 1982; "let another man praise you and not your own mouth" Pr. 27, 2). In more subtle use of this tactic applicants do not spell out the personal qualities of the role they performed, but provide a description of this role that nonetheless seems to elevate their personal qualities. Consider the applicant who noted:

[My previous role entailed] hosting high-rank commercial delegations, negotiations with senior figures in the ministry of finance and ministry of defense in the army. Orders from dozens of suppliers in Europe and the U.S. (#35).

In a second version of the fifth tactic, applicants describe various group memberships, such as hiring organizations, army units or voluntary affiliations. The assumption here seems to be that membership implies personal qualities. To illustrate, an applicant for the marketing person's position elevates his merit by making salient the positive attributes of his prior employer when he notes "I practiced sales promotion and marketing within marketing companies that are amongst the biggest in the country." Similarly, an applicant for the office manager's position provided details on a former employer, and stated

(Name) is a factory merged with (company). Its annual circulation is about 10 million dollars and it employs about 100 employees (#40).

Manifestations of this tactic included mentions of membership in distinct army units, philanthropic bodies or noteworthy community associations. Implicitly, the roles that these institutions assigned to a self-presenter are included in the application scene serving to validate the self-presenter's claim for merit.

*Performance in Similar Situations as a Validation Tactic*

A final, sixth tactic validates a person's merit by highlighting the similarity between his or her previous experiences and current demands. Applicants using this tactic clarified and emphasized the resemblance between the previous situations an applicant handled and the job at hand. As noted in Table 1 the tactic is most complex in that two additional entities are involved in the scene: Other situations, and the currently desired role. The assumption underlying this tactic is that if an individual performed in situations similar to the currently desired role then he or she has more merit for the role. This assumption is consistent with assertions that previous experience is an important predictor of work performance (c.f., McEnrue, 1988, Schmidt, Hunter & Outerbridge, 1986). In the form of the general argument ("My claims about merit are true because..."), applicants using this tactic are saying: "*My claims about merit are true because a situation in which I performed (successfully) in the past is similar to the current situation.*"

More broadly, this tactic relies upon the behavioral consistency principle (Werinmont & Campbell, 1968). In this principle a prediction of future behavior is valid if the predictor variable resembles the predicted behavior: greater resemblance will breed better prediction. Since applicants' repertoire of behaviors do not always correspond to current job requirements, in this tactic applicants review their experiences in light of the organizational requirements. As noted by an applicant for the office manager position "I present my military experience in this context because during my military experience I acquired the best skills for running an office" (#310). The sixth tactic therefore resembles the former (fifth) tactic in that they both rely upon the logic of social identity theory (Turner, 1984; Tajfel & Turner, 1985; Ashforth & Mael, 1989) wherein an individual's association with a particular social category leads to identification with this category and to internalization of its values. But the two tactics are conceptually different: The fifth tactic (previous roles) focuses on *applicants' attributes* arguing that they can be derived, either directly or indirectly, from a previous role. The sixth tactic focuses on *characteristics of a previous experience* and their resemblance (and hence relevance) to the current employment opportunity.

The sixth tactic requires effort and creativity since constructing a similarity between a previous experience and the desired positions is not always simple. In a first version of this tactic, terms that describe the current position (e.g. appear in the ad posting the position) are woven into the application letter. To illustrate, the following two applicants for the office manager's position, who had very different prior experiences, both found a way to use the term 'administration' which appeared in the ad to describe their prior experience:

- (1) I managed the general secretariat of (company). I also managed the offices of the (company) and of (professional organization). These positions involved *administration* and organization (emphasis ours).
- (2) I did my military service as a trainer in officer training in the personnel department, and I stayed on for one year, in the job of deputy commander of officer training – which is a non-easy *administrative* job (emphasis ours).

In a second version of this tactic a description of tasks previously performed is provided in a manner that calls up the similarity between the applicant's experience and the employment opportunity. The similarity between these tasks and the current demands may not be stated, but could be made to appear similar as evident in the following application for the office manager's position

In my position as manager of the general manager's office, I engaged in organizing the administrative staff, setting up and organizing the archive and the library, preparing seminars and lectures for demonstrations for guests, invitations follow-up, administrative follow-up of projects' execution.

In this and other examples where the implied similarity is not stated anywhere in the text, inference are expected from the reader. As in other tactics, attempts can be made to explicate the implicit inference, like the following application for the office manager job:

*My last job as a coordinator resembled the offered job.* In the context of my work as coordinator of the (choir), I was in charge of the technical-operative aspects: Organizing transportation, rehearsals, stage setting, coordination with stage staff, managers, directors, players, etc. (emphasis ours).

In a third, perhaps most creative version of this tactic, one aspect of a previous experience was used to frame the self-presentation of past experience, presenting it as the core element of the previous experience. Such framing offered writers a way of enhancing the apparent similarity between the current job and the previous experience. To illustrate, the following statement of an applicant for the sales position selectively highlights aspects of a previous role that he assumed would be pertinent to the job at hand:

I see myself as an appropriate candidate for the job because of my profession [insurance agent] . . . As an insurance agent your job is to sell. To sell insurance is hard work that requires a lot of skill, persuasion and influence ability. The customer doesn't always know what his needs are, and doesn't always know what he is buying, because at the bottom line, he is only buying 'paper.' Whoever succeeds selling insurance can sell anything.

A somewhat daring use of this tactic is evident in the following application for the marketing position. This applicant has turned a predicament into an opportunity by framing her argument in terms of similarity to the desired job:

I propose myself for the job even though I do not have any practical experience outside the teaching domain. However, if you try to understand the teaching profession, then it is marketing through persuasion and selling of knowledge.

### *Summary*

Study I identified six tactics that call upon six sources for validating self-presentation in application letters: Self report, important others, external indicators, achievements, previous roles and similarity between former experience and a desired job. Our analysis is of letters of application for employment. But there is reason to believe that these validating efforts are not unique to this situation and will be found in other self-presentation contexts. The inductive identification of these tactics raised a set of deductive questions regarding the nature and effectiveness of their use. These questions were examined in two additional studies. Study II applied quantitative and deductive methods to the sample studied in Study I to identify typical patterns of use of the six tactics. Study III examined the generalization of the findings of the first two studies to a new organization and a new occupation, and explored the influence of the use of the tactics on a target audience of hiring managers.

## **STUDY II: USE OF SELF-VALIDATION TACTICS**

### *Overview*

Study II used the same data set as Study I, but the goal was to obtain a more systematic picture regarding the tactics identified in Study I. No propositions were set in this study, because the goal was still descriptive rather than hypothesis testing. Systematic analyses of real-life self-presentation episodes such as application letters are rare in scholarly literature, and was assumed to be a challenge in itself. Moving from identifying the framework of self-validation to empirically studying it is tricky. Hence the goal here was to develop a way for such analysis. The results of this systematic analysis also provided initial insight regarding differences in patterns of use of different tactics by different individuals. Thus, the goal of the study was to establish that the six tactics can be reliably identified, and to begin to unravel additional aspects regarding the use of these tactics.

### *Data Analysis*

Analyses in Study II involved three inter-related but conceptually distinct phases of quantitative analyses: identifying the units of analysis, establishing reliability of coding process, and coding all data.

*Phase I: Identifying units of measurement.* In Study I we assumed that each letter was one unit of analysis. We found however that different parts of a letter could contain multiple episodes of self-validation. In Study II we therefore shifted our level of measurement from a complete letter to *segments* of a letter (Rousseau, 1985). A segment of a letter was defined as *a distinct part of a letter, apparent in a structural partition made by the writer's physical arrangement of text, or by a shift in content.*

To construct the data set for Study II all letters were segmented. First, letters were scanned for segments defined by the writer through starting a new paragraph, use of headings, using graphic symbols such as bullets, or separating text using blank lines. Technical parts of standard writing (e.g. date or sincerely) were not included in the segmentation process, but text following sub-headings such as "education" or "work experience" was partitioned further according to the above criteria. For letters using informal narrative, or containing few or no partitions, transitions in content were used to identify distinct segments. Next, each segment was given a consecutive number. The opening segment of each letter was numbered 1, the following segment was numbered 2, etc., providing a quantitative index of the number of segments in a letter. The reliability of this segmentation process was 0.91.

*Phase II: Establishing reliability.* Once letters were segmented, each segment could be analyzed regarding its use of self-validation tactics. Two independent judges (one of the authors and an advanced psychology student) segmented and coded letters. Codes noted both which tactics were used and the use of different versions of the tactics as described in Study I and noted in Table 2. Judges began by coding three letters separately. They then compared their coding, discussed disagreements and coded a new set of letters. After several iterations judges computed empirical indices of reliability and confirmed an inter-judge reliability for coding of tactics of 0.94.

*Phase III: Coding letters.* Once reliability was established, the complete set of letters was segmented and coded by the same judges regarding the use of the six tactics. Each segment of a letter could be coded as using no tactics, using one tactic or using more than one tactic.

### *Findings*

A first important finding of Study II was evident once the coding was complete, namely that identifying and coding of tactics is a highly reliable process (see above).

The process of letter segmentation resulted in a total of 5835 segments extracted from the complete set of 418 letters. The minimum number of segments in a single letter was 2, the maximum number was 29, with a mean of 11.5, a median of 11, a mode of 6, and a Standard Deviation of 5.1. Approximately half (47.8%) of the segments (2787) were coded as using at least one self-validation tactic. This finding offers initial confirmation that self-validation is a frequently used strategy in this sample. However there were clear differences in the use of the different tactics. Analyses were possible both across the complete sample of segments (or letters) and within individual letters. The two different levels of analysis indicate three relatively common validation sources – description of previous roles, performance in similar situations and self-report (evident in 24%, 18% and 18% of the segments respectively). The other three tactics were used far less frequently (all used in less than 10% of segments). These differences are statistically significant ( $p < 0.01$ ).

#### *Frequency of Use of the Self-Validation Strategy*

Conceptually the use of *any* of the self-validation tactics is the use of the self-validation strategy. To explore the use of this strategy we computed the number of times an applicant used any variation of the six tactics in his or her letter. High values of this variable indicate extensive use of *any* of the self-validation tactics, or use of the self-validation strategy. But high values on this variable do not necessarily indicate use of different tactics: an applicant using the same tactic 13 times and one using each of the variations once would both score 13 on this variable. The results of this analysis were a right skewed distribution, indicating frequent use of the self-validation strategy. The maximum number of tactics used in one letter was 68, the mean number of tactics used was 10.1, the median 8, the mode 4. The standard deviation of number of tactics used was 8.3. In other words, on average writers used the tactics 10.1 time in a letter. Only 0.7% of writers did not use any of the tactics in their letters, while a majority used tactics between one and ten times in their letter.

#### *Creative Use of the Self-Validation Strategy*

A second analysis examined to what extent self-presenters varied the tactics they used. Variations of the different tactics were ignored in this analysis, the focus being on use of the distinct tactics noted in Table 1, which suggests creativity in the use of the self-validation strategy. Individuals who used at least one variation of a certain tactic at least once, received a score of “1” on this tactic, while those who didn’t use any variation of a certain tactic, were coded

“0”. This analysis therefore considers only whether an applicant used a certain tactic, not how many times he or she used it. Both an applicant who uses one version of a tactic and another applicant who uses all three versions will receive a code of 1 on the tactic. This analysis revealed a normal distribution in the prolific use of tactics. Some (2.4%) applicants used as many as 6 tactics in their letter, but most (77%) used between 2 and four different tactics. On average, 3.2 tactics were used, with a median and a mode of 3 tactics (standard deviation of 1.2). Thus, this analysis reveals interpersonal variation in the use of the different tactics, with only a few self-presenters not engaging any of the tactics but others engaging all six tactics. This supports our assertion that self-validation is a prevailing part of self-presentation episodes.

A third analysis examined the relationship between the use of the self-validation strategy and the (creative) use of multiple tactics. The question addressed here is the extent to which utilization of *many* (versus *few*) self-validation tactics tends to call up *different* tactics. The analysis confirmed a highly significant correlation ( $r = 0.58$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) between the two variables. Thus, frequent use of the self-validation strategy is positively correlated with utilization of different tactics.

#### *Independence Versus Interdependence of Different Tactics*

A next set of analyses considered combinations of different tactics. The premise here is that the six tactics of self-validation we identified are not mutually exclusive, since a segment of a letter could make use of more than one tactic. The question addressed here is whether there is a systematic pattern to the use of multiple tactics. To answer this question a correlation was computed between the use of different tactics in the same segment of a letter. The results of this analysis are summarized in Table 2.

As evident in Table 2, the use of certain tactics was related to the use of the other tactics. For example, the use of evidence of achievement as validation tended to appear in conjunction with other tactics rather than alone. But even in these cases the correlations are moderate suggesting less than 20% of variance in the use of one tactic that can be explained by the use of the other tactic.

#### *Individual Differences in Use of Tactics*

*Gender and self-validation:* No significant relationship was found between sex of writer and frequency of use tactics or between sex and use of different tactics. Likewise, no significant differences were found between males and females in the use of the first five tactics including self report, references to important

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**Table 2.** Correlations Between use of Different Self-Validation Tactics in Two Studies.

	Important others		External indicators		Evidence of achievement		Description of previous roles		Similar situations	
	Study II	Study III	Study II	Study III	Study II	Study III	Study II	Study III	Study II	Study III
Self report	0.16*	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.4**	0.1	0.3**	0.05	0.3**	0.03
Important others			0.09	-0.1	0.4**	0.6**	0.01	0.3**	0.2*	0.2*
External indicators					0.2**	-0.009	0.05	-0.07	0.04	0.1
Evidence of achievement							0.3**	0.5**	0.2**	0.3**
Description of prior roles									0.3**	0.7**



others, objective indicators, evidence of achievements, or mention of previous roles. A significant correlation was found, however, between men and women in the use of the sixth tactic of explicating performance in similar situations. Females were significantly more likely to use this tactic than men ( $r = 0.18$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

*Age and education and self-validation:* A moderate but statistically significant correlation was found between age and education and frequency of use of self-validation ( $r = 0.13$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ;  $r = 0.1$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , respectively). The correlation between both age and education and the use of varied tactics was not significant. Frequency tests showed that younger people (22–35 years) tended to use fewer tactics than middle aged or older people (age 36–50 and 50–62) ( $\chi^2_{(9)} = 35.9$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

#### *Summary*

Study II confirmed that the self-validation tactics identified and described in Study I could be reliably coded, and that they are used widely in different segments of letters of application for employment. The study also provides further evidence that the tactics are conceptually distinct, in that only limited and moderate relationships exist between the use of one tactic and another. Finally, the study suggests that demographic differences play only a minimal role in determining the use of the tactics.

### **STUDY III: REPLICATION AND TEST OF IMPACT OF SELF-VALIDATION**

#### *Overview*

The first two studies drew from one set of data to identify six tactics of validating self-presentation claims used by job applicants addressing a potential employer. Study III confirms the use of these tactics in another sample of self-presentation letters written by a different group of job applicants, and provides an opportunity to test the relationship between the use of self-validation and judgements made by target persons (readers of letters).

The data for Study III was letters written by applicants responding to ads announcing an opening for an accountant that appeared in central newspapers in Israel on four different Fridays in 1994. The study therefore examined self-presentation episodes ignited by similar stimuli. But the data were collected several years later, and involved a different group of people (different set of

job applicants), who were applying to a different position (accountant rather than office manager and marketing person) in a different organization (public rather than private). These differences mean that Study III offers an excellent perspective on whether the findings of the first two studies can be generalized.

### *Sample*

A medium-size publicly traded consumer services firm in central Israel looking to hire a new actuary received the sample of eighty-five (85) application letters studied. The firm hired a new actuary *before* we obtained or analyzed the data, and we were not involved in the hiring process, but we were able to obtain the 'short list' of people invited to an interview. Letters in this sample varied in length from one page (5.88%) to more than 2 pages (25.88%) with a mode of 2 pages (68.24%). Most letters (78.8%) were fully typed, but about one fourth (21.2%) were handwritten. Demographically, the sample was relatively homogeneous, with only 19% females, and level of education varying from post-high school accounting diploma, to a university MA degree in accounting (with a mode of undergraduate degree in accounting, 64.7%). Age of writers varied from 26 to 59 year (mean 37.5, median 37). Applicants' experience in accounting varied from none to 30 years, with a mean and a median of 12 years.

Unlike the first set of data, the current sample included information about the success of the self-presentation efforts. Twenty-seven (32%) of the writers were invited to an interview, an accomplishment of a writer's short-term goal for the letter. Being invited to a job interview enhances the individual's chances of gaining entry into the organization (receiving a job offer), and was therefore a dependent variable in the study. The independent variable was the nature and extent of use of the six validation tactics.

The overarching proposition of the study was *that greater and more elaborate use of the six validation tactics would be positively correlated with an invitation to a job interview*. A more specific prediction was that the inclusion of more (rather than less) entities in the self-presentation effort would enhance an applicant's chances of success (see Table 1). Thus, performance in similar situations was expected to be more strongly and positive correlated with success than any of the other tactics because this tactic was conceptualized to include both other situations in which an applicant had operated and the desired role.

### *Data Analysis*

As in Study II each letter was first segmented into empirically or conceptually distinct segments. The rules of thumb for letter segmentation were identical to

those developed in Study II, and inter-judge reliability of the segmentation process was 0.89 confirming the high reliability of segmentation of self-presentation episodes depicted in Study II. The sample of letters provided a sample of 957 segments. The mean number of segments in the letters in Study III was (with a minimum of 11.1, a mode of 12, and a standard deviation of 4.4). Each segment was also coded about the use of the self-validation tactics. The inter-judge reliability of these judgements was 0.91, again confirming a highly reliable coding process.

### *Results*

Similar to Study II, slightly less than half of all segments (43.7%) were coded as using one or more self-validation tactic and the distribution of use of tactics was again skewed to the right. A tiny fraction of writers (1.2%) did not use any tactics in their letters, and 71.8% used the tactics between 1 and 10 times. Variation in the use of tactics was again normally distributed. Thus, the general pattern in the use of tactics was strikingly similar between Study II and Study III.

The pattern of use of the different tactics was also roughly similar to that observed in Study 2. The correlation between the extent of use of any tactic (or use of the self-validation strategy) and the creative use of multiple self-validation tactics was positive and significant ( $r = 0.7, p < 0.001$ ). And as evident in Table 2 the consistent pattern was that the tactic of evidence of achievements was used in tandem with two other tactics (previous roles and similar situations) and the tactic of emphasis of similarity was used in tandem with descriptions of previous roles in both studies. The similarities in the use of different tactics in spite of the significant differences between the samples suggest that the pattern is an accurate depiction of self-validation in self-presentation of job applicants.

Also similar to Study II, demographic variables played a limited role in explaining the use of tactics. No significant relationship was found between sex of writer and use of tactics, but a moderate and significant correlation was found between writer age and extent of use of tactics ( $r = 0.2, p < 0.05$ ). Writer tenure as an accountant was also somewhat correlated extent of use of tactics ( $r = 0.2, p < 0.05$ ). Writers' age, tenure, or education, were not correlated with use of varied tactics.

### *Relationship between Self-Validation and Target Person Judgements*

The real contribution of Study III was the opportunity to examine the relationship between a use of self-validation strategy and impressions formed

by target persons. This test examines the value (for self-presenters) of engaging the self-validation strategy. First, a Chi-square test confirmed a highly significant relationship between the use of any of the tactics and the invitation to an interview (Chi Square = 16.487,  $p = 0.023$ ). This significant finding means that the use of the self-validation strategy contributed to a self-presenter's accomplishment of his or her short-term goal of being invited to an interview.

A better view of the impact of self-validation is obtained by the correlation between the use of the tactics and the dependent variable of being invited to an interview. In this analysis, as summarized in Table 3, demographic variables and length of letter were included as control variables. The use of individual tactics and the aggregate indices of use of the overall strategy (as measured by frequency of use of tactics and creative use of tactics) were examined in separate analyses because they are inter-dependent. As evident in Table 3, four validation sources – self report, evidence of achievements, description of previous role, and performance in similar situations were found to have an independent, positive and significant effect on the dependent variable ( $r = 0.25$ ,  $r = 0.20$ ,  $r = 0.29$ , and  $r = 0.40$ , respectively;  $p < 0.05$  in all instances). When use of any of the tactics was included in a multiple regression equation predicting the dependent variable of invitation to an interview, the squared multiple correlation obtained was  $R^2 = 0.29$  (adjusted  $R^2 = 0.20$ ,  $F = 3.03$ ,  $p < 0.005$ ). Thus, use of the self-validation strategy explains a significant portion of the variance among individuals invited versus not invited to a job interview. The strategy therefore contributed to the accomplishment of the formal goal of self-presentation in applications for employment.

Finally, the relationship between the frequent and the creative use of the self-validation strategy (which were defined as the use of any variation of any tactic or the use of different or varied tactics) were examined. Significant and positive correlations were observed ( $r = 0.35$ , and  $r = 0.26$  respectively,  $p < 0.005$ ), and the multiple correlation of the two indices of the use of the strategy was  $R^2 = 0.27$  (adjusted  $R^2 = 0.20$ ,  $F = 3.95$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This completes the confirmation of the merit of self-validation efforts in promoting the effectiveness of self-presentation efforts of job applicants. As evident in Table 3, the number of segments, (which is an indicator of the length of a letter), and individuals' seniority or education were not valid predictors of whether an applicant was invited to an interview. Only segments of letters that make use of tactics to validate an individual's merit for the job are a valid predictor.

Thus, the overarching proposition of the study was supported, wherein use of individual tactics, and of the validation strategy had a positive and significant relationship to the accomplishment of the short-term goal of an application for employment. The more specific proposition was also supported: The corre-

**Table 3.** Relationship Between Use of Self-Validation and Invitation to Interview.

Predictor Variable	Bi-variate Correlation	Multiple Regression
<b>Demographic (Control) Variables</b>		
Sex	-0.07	R <sup>2</sup> = 0.05 (Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> = 0.008)
Age	0.04	
Seniority (years of experience)	0.10	
Level of education	0.18	
Length (no. of segments) in letter	-0.01	
<b>Individual Tactics</b>		
Self Report	0.25*	R <sup>2</sup> = 0.33** (Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> = 0.23**)
Important Others	-0.03	
External Indicators	0.06	
Evidence of achievements	0.20**	
Previous roles	0.29**	
Performance in similar situations	0.40**	
<b>Overall Strategy of Self-Validation</b>		
Frequency of use of any tactic	0.35**	R <sup>2</sup> = 0.27** (Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> = 0.20**)
Variation of use of different tactics	0.26**	

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lation between an invitation to an interview and the use of the tactic that involves the largest number of parties (performance in similar situations) was the highest among all tactics (Table 3).

## DISCUSSION

In three studies we explored episodes of self-presentation of individuals applying for employment. The first study identified a previously unrecognized aspect of behavior in such situations, of managing the suspicion of target persons regarding self-presentation claims by offering validation of the claims. A strategy of self-validation was shown in this study to comprise various tactics that rely on conceptually distinct sources. The strategy is suggested to surface when self-presentation claims made may be challenged, and when the outcomes of the self-presentation effort are of importance. Two additional studies confirmed and

illustrated that self-presenters use the self-validation strategy. The validation sources identified may rely on the self-presenter him or her self, which offers only limited objectivity. Alternately, validation may implicitly include additional entities in the self-presentation episode, such as other (important) people, other agencies, evident results, or other roles. Use of the strategy seems to be guided by the presumption that various parties or pieces of evidence can enhance trust in claims made, and improve the effectiveness of a self-presentation effort. The third study offers initial evidence that this presumption has merit.

Additional research is warranted regarding the merits and constraints of each of the tactics, as well as the extent and nature of the influence of the various sources on target persons. Moreover, our analyses could not do justice to the notion of objectivity of validation sources. Exploring this notion further may contribute to the broader question of the process of influence of any impression management effort. Wayne and Ferris (1990), for example, argue for a cognitive processing model, according to which ingratiating attempts of subordinates lead supervisors to form positive images of the subordinates, which in turn leads to favorable attributions and desirable decisions at junctures such as performance evaluations. A competing model may argue for an emotional process wherein impression management efforts make targets *feel* good, leading them to make certain decisions (Jones & Pitman, 1982). More objective validation sources may fit with the former argument, while less objective and more personal sources may ignite the latter dynamic.

Our theory suggests that self-presentation may be more effective when a process of mutual reinforcement of claims is employed. If each tactic alone reinforces assertions of merit, perhaps when tactics are combined, they further reinforce or compensate for each other. To illustrate, the tactic of self-report, when standing alone, could have a detrimental effect if viewed as presumptuous. Combining it with additional tactics of previous roles or similar situations (that are more objective) can curtail some of this suspicion. Relying only on objective tactics, however, can turn a self-presentation letter into a formal and impersonal document, leaving out the person behind the letter. Thus, coupling of objective, more "impersonal" tactics with subjective and personal tactics may serve to both back up personal declarations and vitalize more formal validation claims.

Our study of individual differences in the use of tactics only taps the issue. But the theory of self-validation may be consequential for considerations of affirmative action hiring. Xin (1997) describes differences in impression management displays between Asian and European Americans arguing that these differences may explain why Asian Americans do not attain leadership status in Fortune 500 firms. In a similar logic, members of minority or demographically different groups may be more or less likely to use the self-

validation strategy, or any of the specific tactics we identified. Our Study II revealed a greater tendency of females to draw a similarity between previous experience and the current role observed. This may reflect the insecurity of females regarding assumptions of the similarity. The question is whether the use of the 'similarity' tactic can overcome differences in attributions made to male versus female self-presenters (cf. Wayne & Ferris, 1990). Research on the use of self-validation may help understand and potentially overcome demographically biased hiring. An applied implication of this set of studies may be to incorporate training in self-validation in workshops for successful job searching (Vinokur, Price & Schul, 1995).

Some of the tactics we identified have been discussed in earlier work on self-presentation. For example, the first tactic of reliance on self-report and the fourth tactic of evidence of achievements are respectively similar to the tactics of self-enhancement and entitlements identified by Jones and Pittman (1982). More broadly, all the tactics we identified seem to be *tactical and assertive* forms of self-presentation in the typology developed by Tedeschi and Melburg (1984). The important contribution of our theory of self-validation, however, is in identifying the anxiety that can accompany self-presentation efforts, and the means self-presenters have for overcoming such anxiety. This anxiety explains when the tactics are likely to be used: When the impact of a self-presentation effort is important, and when there is room for concern about whether self-presentation claims will be trusted.

Future research needs to examine under what conditions such anxiety is likely to emerge. One prediction may be that this is related to the power relations among participants in a self-presentation episode. One paradigm that may enrich future research on the notion of self-validation is therefore that of resource dependence theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). In this framework two complementary predictions can be made. First, lower power parties, who are in a resource-dependent position, can be expected to be more likely to employ self-validation tactics as a way of enhancing their control and reducing uncertainty. For lower power parties self-validation can serve as a buffer against suspicions and dismissals by higher power targets (Tjosvold, 1977).

In contrast, parties communicating from a position of power may be less likely to use self-validation, because they may be less concerned about not being trusted. Job applicants who have some unique properties or who feel they have some inherent control over the potential employer may act as if they are operating from a position of high power. Thus, job applicants who are in some self-evident way qualified for a position be less likely to engage in self-validation, while applicants for the same position who do not have inherent evidence of their merit may be more likely to use the self-validation strategy.

To illustrate, graduates of a prestigious university applying for a job on university stationary or through a university placement office can be predicted to act from a position of greater power than graduates of the same university applying on their own. The former may make less use of the self-validation strategy, or selectively use a different set of tactics than the latter.

The differences in the use of the self-report tactic between the subjects in Study II and those in Study III offer initial support of this hypothesis. As evident in Table 2, subjects in Study II were likely to combine the self-report tactic with other tactics, notably evidence of achievements, description of previous roles, and emphasis of performance in similar situations. Subject in Study III did not combine self-report with the other tactics. These differences may be attributable to the higher level of education and professional background (or assumed inherent merit and power) of subjects in Study III. (Recall that most applicants in Study II had only a high school education, while all applicants in Study III had at least a post high school technical degree in accounting and most had a college degree in accounting). The higher level of education, and the professional training in accounting may have instilled self-confidence in the self-presenters in Study III that led them to invest fewer efforts in backing up their self-report of merit. Importantly, the findings in Study III (Table 3) suggest that this self-confidence is not necessarily justified, because use of more tactics, and more creative use of tactics (i.e. combinations of multiple tactics) was found to positively correlate with an invitation to an interview. Thus, accomplishment of the short-term goals of the self-presentation effort by the professional accountants in Study III did seem to be influenced by more extensive use of self-validation, although the self-presenters did not necessarily recognize that.

Our study focused on the individual level of analysis. But self-presentation and impression management also occurs at the organizational level (Ginzel, Sutton & Kramer, 1993; Elsbach & Sutton, 1992). Convincing a target audience that self-presentation claims are valid may be helpful at the organizational level as well, and non-obtrusive evidence of organizational level self-presentation may be found in public reports such as annual reports or recruiting announcements (cf. Staw, McKechnie & Puffer, 1983; Salancik & Meindl, 1984). In this vein, Rafaeli (1998) argued and illustrated that organizational self-presentation in organizational recruiting advertisements seeks to validate the merit of the organization as a good place to work. Similarly, other forms of organizational level self-presentation, such as annual reports, may benefit from the strategy of self-validation.

The identification of an anxiety about self-presentation claims being held suspect and the articulation of the *self-validation strategy* as a way to handle



this anxiety is one contribution of this effort. There are two additional important contributions. First, the strategy of self-validation reveals how disparate perspectives on impression management discussed by other authors may complement rather than contradict each other (Becker & Colquitt, 1992; Schlenker, 1992; Leary & Kowalski, 1990). The six validation tactics reveal self-presenters' efforts to validate the self being presented. Such efforts reflect recognition that some claims may be valid, but others are fraud, a premise of the "restrictive" perspective. The self-validation strategy, however, is inherently expansive in that writers selectively call up various sources to support their merit. The creative assertion of merit that is inherent to the different tactics reflects the self-marketing process assumed by the expansive perspective. The goal of the strategy, however, is to meet the constraints of the restrictive perspective, according to which some self-presentation claims are not true. Thus, self-validation is self-presenters' way of acting according to the expansive perspective in order to cope with constraints imposed by the restrictive perspective.

This bridge that self-validation efforts construct between the perspectives supports our earlier suggestion that the two perspectives represent points of view of different participants in a self-presentation episode. The issue of a truthful versus produced self, which is the core of the restrictive (screening) perspective, seems to be the receiver's view (cf. Brown & Campion, 1994). Writers' attempts to validate their claims are due to sensitivity to the predicament of the targets of their self-presentation effort, who have to sort through multiple and competing self-presentation claims. This predicament is met by engaging tactics to validate claims. The tactics represent the expansive (dramaturgical) view of impression management, and fit well with a sender who wants to convey a good and convincing message to a target. The self-validation strategy therefore does not dismiss the philosophical differences between the two perspectives, but rather suggests that they pertain to different participants in self-presentation episodes.

Second, in investigating letters of application for employment we suggest a new medium for the study of impression management and influence in organizations (Giacalone & Rosenfeld, 1989, 1991; Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984). Previous research on these topics engaged survey measures or laboratory manipulations (e.g. Schlenker, Dlugolecki & Doherty, 1994; Wayne & Ferris, 1990; Stevens & Kristoff, 1995; Xin, 1997) both of which lack external validity. Field studies of impression management tend to rely on complex methods of videotaping and coding of behaviors (e.g. Stevens & Kristoff, 1995). Letters of application, and similar documents such as personal statements, are untapped resources for the study of real life self-presentation behaviors. These situations provide self-presenters ample opportunity for planning their behavior and can

be studied without intrusion. We document that such data can be reliably analyzed regarding self-presentation tactics, and add to the emerging list of non-obtrusive yet meaningful and useful measures of social behavior (Webb, 1966). By studying two samples of letters, written by applicants to different positions, we have established that the notion of self-validation can be generalized to disparate settings. We begin to address the question of what comprises an effective letter of application for employment, by identifying a dependent variable (being invited to a job interview), and by conceptually defining effectiveness as communicating a positive and desirable image to a target person.

Finally, it is important to recognize limitations of our study. All our data comprised responses to employment ads that appeared in a newspaper, and were targeted at positions in for-profit business settings in Israel. Different dynamics may be manifest when applicants do not respond to ads of a potential employer, in applications for qualitatively different positions, such as teachers, social workers, or graphic artists, or by job applicants in other parts of the world. We hope that these questions will be considered in future research.

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