**Bounded authenticity:**

The paradox of being genuine in professional interactions

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**ABSTRACT**

Bringing one’s “whole self” to professional life is increasingly becoming a requirement, not a rebellion. However, extensive research has also demonstrated the value of consciously filtering behavior to enhance or adapt one’s image in organizational contexts. Taken together, research on boundary theory, impression management, and emotional labor suggests that individuals now face a paradox of self-presentation – to seem authentic, but also polished - when it comes to making a positive first impression in professional interactions. The present paper explores how organizational expectations of authenticity can be challenging and potentially detrimental to performance due to this paradox. To test the impact of expectations of authenticity on other’s evaluations of performance, participants filmed themselves performing a brief video pitch for a hypothetical job, in which they were encouraged either to try to appear authentic, professional, both simultaneously, or neither authentic nor professional. Gender differences were apparent in how expectations to be authentic were interpreted and enacted: men engaged in more “raw” or unregulated authenticity, which led to reduced performance when trying to be authentic. Women, conversely, engaged in “bounded” or regulated authenticity, engaging in deep acting even when told to be true to themselves. These results suggest that organizational expectations of authenticity may backfire when interpreted as permission to let one’s guard fully down, and that interpersonal authenticity is more effective when thoughtfully curated with one’s audience in mind.
INTRODUCTION

Perceptions of authenticity are central to successful relationships across all facets of life. We relate more readily and deeply to individuals who we feel are genuine and who engage in deep and honest self-disclosure (Aron et al. 1997; Altman & Taylor, 1973) and with whom we feel a sense of shared reality (Rossignac-Milon & Higgins, 2018). Interpersonally, we are attracted to those who seem spontaneous and uncalculating in their behavior and appearance, because this makes them seem more genuine and authentic (Berger & Barasch, 2017). We associate authenticity with having good character, and inauthenticity with feelings of immorality and filth (Gino, Kouchaki, & Galinsky, 2015).

In organizational settings, we admire and trust leaders, colleagues, and potential hires who behave in ways that we see as real and sincere (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), and similarly reject those who seem phony or to be purposefully acting in pursuit of a desired persona (Zuckerman, 2016). Expressing one’s true or “authentic” identity positively impacts outcomes such as work transitions (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010), social relationships at work (Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010), newcomer socialization and performance (Cable, Gino & Staats, 2013) and innovation and organizational change (Swann et al., 2009). Given that these outcomes all depend on successful social interactions, it makes sense that interpersonal perceptions of authenticity are critical to the development and continuation of meaningful relationships and high-quality connections at work, which often require mutual vulnerability, openness, and self-disclosure to grow and to thrive (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Stephens, Dutton & Heaphy, 2011).

As our economy continues to shift toward knowledge, service, and experience-driven industries, relating to colleagues and customers in a seemingly genuine, personal way is likely to be both increasingly important yet also pose new challenges (Grant & Parker, 2009; Oldham &
While questions regarding the value of enacting one’s “true self” in social situations date back decades or even centuries (James, 2013; Trilling, 2009), admonitions to be authentic, real, and to bring one’s “whole self” to the workplace are increasingly prevalent in our culture (Dumas & Sanchez-Burks, 2015; Lehman, O’Connor, Kovács, & Newman, 2018; Roberts, Cha, Hewlin, & Settles, 2009). Now, more than ever, we celebrate individuals (Hahl, Zuckerman, & Kim, 2017), organizational leaders (Hahl, Kim, & Zuckerman, 2018), and organizations themselves (Carroll & Wheaton, 2009) that we perceive as being honest and genuine about who they are and what they believe regardless of whether they conform to social norms or organizational expectations (Avolio et al., 2005; Dumas & Sanchez-Burks, 2015).

Due to increasing numbers of employees in non-traditional working arrangements (Ashford et al. 2007; Petriglieri, Ashford, & Wrzesniewski, in press) and technological innovations, many evaluators will be those with whom we interact only briefly and virtually or unilaterally (McFarland & Ployhart, 2015; Rothbard, Ollier-Malaterre, & Berg, 2014). The importance of perceived authenticity is also relevant to these brief, fleeting interactions, such as between employees and customers (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015) and employers and job candidates (Moore, Lee, Kim, & Cable, 2017). Authenticity is also important in virtual and/or unidirectional encounters, such as between bloggers and their online followers (Caza, Moss, & Vough, 2017) and political candidates and their constituents (Hahl et al. 2017). However, numerous challenges accompany making accurate attributions about whether an individual is being “true to themselves,” especially in relatively ephemeral or low information contexts. Despite our propensity to make quick attributions about specific traits in individuals (Willis & Todorov, 2006), we aren’t always accurate in these attributions (Ambady & Gray, 2002). Discerning what is authentic for someone with high self-complexity (Caza, Moss, & Vough, 2017) or multiple
identities (Creary, Caza & Roberts, 2015; Ramarajan, 2014) may be especially difficult, if not absurd.

Yet, despite the debatable philosophical veracity of the “true self” construct in general, there is overwhelming evidence that people still consistently make attributions about the nature of this self (Strohminger, Knobe, & Newman, 2017) and that individuals persist in making authenticity attributions based on limited interactions (Johnson, Robinson, & Mitchell, 2004). That is, they reward leaders, colleagues, and organizations for their authenticity, even when the content of these so-called authentic behaviors is in opposition to sacred values such as basic truth-telling, morality, or cleanliness (Hahl & Zuckerman, 2017; Carroll & Wheaton, 2009). In sum, there appears to be unique value in perceived authenticity above and beyond other important interpersonal traits. Thus, the quality (or ability) to “seem authentic” is likely to continue to be valued by organizations and perceived as important and desirable in both fleeting and lasting workplace interactions, both from the perspective of individuals as well as organizations.

**Downsides of authenticity in professional settings: need for image management and emotional regulation**

Despite the widely shared admiration for people who are perceived to be authentic, behaving in an unvarnished, *truly* authentic manner (i.e., without attempts to regulate one’s emotions or image to fulfill organizational or social demands) may carry substantial interpersonal and occupational risks, especially when trying to make a first impression. Acting authentically may not always be straightforward or desirable in work situations, especially when there are also strong demands to present oneself in a manner that is both professionally
appropriate (Hewlin, 2003; 2009) but that also showcases one’s personal qualities (Reid, 2015) or “best self” (Cable, Gino, & Staats, 2013; Cable & Kay, 2012). Employees frequently perceive a need to act in ways that are socially prescribed, unnatural, or even inauthentic to fulfill role requirements and to conform to social norms (Hewlin, 2003; 2009; Pillemer & Rothbard, in press). This need for conformity, and subsequent emotional and behavioral approaches to address it, are well documented by organizational scholars, and include putting on facades of conformity (Hewlin, 2003; 2009), conveying particular emotions that are desired and/or required by one’s organizational role (Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 2015; Tsai et al., 2018), or more generally altering one’s behavior or expressed personality in a chameleon-like fashion depending on the situation (Kilduff & Day, 1994, Mehra, Kilduff, & Brass, 2001).

Taken together, this extensive body of work on impression management, self-presentation, and emotional labor stands in seeming opposition to the notion that appearing authentic is the best route to success in organizations. Indeed, this research suggests that carefully constructed external displays or presentations of self are necessary for effective functioning in organizations, and that these purposeful acts are central to positively shaping social identities and behavior (Baumeister, 1982; Bolino, 2008; Goffman, 1959; Grandey & Gabriel, 2015; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Ramarajan & Reid, 2013; Reid, 2015). To succeed in organizations, many individuals need to actively seek to control the impressions of others (Leary & Kowalski, 1990), strategically shifting their presentations of self to construct desired images that will bring about social rewards and positive identities depending on a given audience (Bolino, 2008; Schlenker, 1985; Synder, 1974). The ability to cultivate positive impressions in the eyes of others is critical to many objective performance outcomes including hiring decisions (Kristof-Brown, Barrick, & Franke, 2002), performance evaluations (Wayne & Liden, 1995),
and boardroom appointments (Westphal & Stern, 2006, 2007). People who are able to engage in successful regulation or “deep acting” (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015), and to adapt their personality to “fit” a range of organizational situations (Kilduff & Day, 1994; Mehra, Kilduff, & Brass, 2001; Reid, 2015), tend to perform better than their non-acting, or more truly authentically-behaving peers.

**A paradox of self-presentation: seeming like your authentic and professional self**

The social rewards of perceived authenticity and increasing cultural pressures to “bring your whole self to work,” coupled with the rewards of and demands for maintaining a high level of professionalism and cultural “fit” within an organization (Cable & Judge, 1996; Reid, 2015), suggest that individuals, especially those in jobs that actively encourage authentic impressions or connections, may increasingly face a uniquely challenging paradox of self-presentation. Specifically, they may perceive organizational demands to be simultaneously true to themselves and authentic, while also being professional and polished. In other words, employees must give the impression of not actively managing (but still conveying) a desirable impression that is “true to themselves” yet consonant with the expectations of the particular role and organizational culture. The essence of this tension is eloquently stated by Zuckerman (2016): “Somehow, we must master the ever-shifting challenge of presenting ourselves in a manner that is conventional enough to demonstrate capability and commitment to the audience but different (and indifferent) enough to demonstrate an internal compass” (p. 194). This particular challenge is distinct from the internal debate some individuals feel between being true to themselves and conforming to external expectations; it is an expressly external, or self-presentational, dilemma about being perceived as both professional and authentic. How individuals within organizations respond to
and manage this dilemma, and how these efforts are perceived by others and impact performance, remains largely unexplored, and is the focus of the present research.

While likely to be present in myriad organizational situations, this self-presentational paradox may be especially pronounced in workplace situations in which there are norms and benefits attached to self-enhancement (as opposed to self-verification), and in which individuals have only thin slices of information about those with whom they are interacting. These types of high-pressure, ephemeral situations – including the use of brief video pitches in the hiring process, high-speed networking events, virtual work interactions, and establishing and maintaining social media connections with colleagues and clients – are becoming central fixtures in the new world of work (Hinds & Mortensen, 2005; McFarland & Ployhart, 2015; Leonardi & Vaast, 2017; Schinoff, 2017). Yet, the majority of research on how authenticity impacts organizational relationships focuses on more stable, long term relationships in traditional settings (Cable et al. 2013, Hewlin, 2003, 2009). Moreover, prior work has shown that the attributions people make about others’ authenticity vary as a function of how well they know them – that is, in short-term relationships, evaluators look to an actor’s behavior more than intent for judging authenticity, but the reverse is true for long-term relationships (Johnson et al., 2004). Given these trends in both research and practice, I focus specifically on high self-enhancement, fleeting contexts in order to evaluate how individuals perceive and signal their authenticity to others under such conditions.

**How trying to be authentic may backfire, especially in brief evaluative situations**

The paradox of self-presentation begs the question: Is it wise to try to be your authentic self in an evaluative situation? Or, could this approach potentially backfire, especially if you
engage in “raw” authenticity – that is, uncalculated emotional expression or behavior with only minimal regard for external demands and pressures?

Findings on the value of being oneself in workplace scenarios are mixed. Some studies suggest that expressing one’s authentic self (or at least a version of this self) to others is beneficial for not only one’s job satisfaction, but also for performance. However, upon closer examination, in many of these studies there is an implicit qualifying feature, or bounded element, to the desired “authentic” presentation – either in the version of the self that is presented or in the type of person who benefits from authentic self-disclosure. For example, Cable and colleagues (2013) found that sharing one’s “best self” with others at work has been shown to lead to improved satisfaction and performance over time for new employees. Yet, the key finding of this particular study was not about employees sharing the most real or “unfiltered” version of themselves; rather, it was about them creating a deliberately favorable version of themselves – their “best” self in a non-work context. In a similar way, another study found that individuals who self-verify, or express themselves authentically, tend to do better in job interviews – but only if they were already evaluated to be in the top 10% of applicants (Moore et al., 2015). These studies thus suggest an important contingency, namely, that it is effective to be yourself, but only if you are the type of person who already fits the template of desirable qualities for the organization.

Amidst evidence that cultivating authentic impressions can be effective in evaluative work settings, there is ample research to suggest that trying to be their “authentic self” may actually be difficult for employees to enact – even more so than being professional or trying to conform. For example, people experience the highest levels of state inauthenticity when they are
being evaluated (Sedikides et al., 2013, 2017) and have difficulty separating feedback on their ideas from their personal identity when the work is creative, suggesting that authenticity in creative or knowledge-based fields may be particularly challenging (Baer & Brown, 2012; Grimes, 2017). As Roberts (2005) suggests, only professional images that are both authentic and credible lead to positive interpersonal outcomes – one can’t just be one or the other and expect to succeed. Other scholars have identified the tensions that accompany being one’s authentic self, especially when individuals have high self-complexity (Caza et al., 2017). For these individuals, the pressure to be seen as authentic required additional work and active cultivation – perhaps more so than if individuals had chosen to act inauthentically (Caza et al., 2017). Some participants even went as far as to explicitly claim their “unapologetic authenticity” to others, in an attempt to show that they were being who they really are (but clearly struggled with just doing it, as opposed to articulating it). In many workplace situations today, it is not enough to identify either credibility or authenticity as single self-presentational goals; rather, one needs to accomplish both to succeed. Moreover, the pursuit of this cultivated brand of authenticity requires nuanced interpersonal navigation – and may have the potential to backfire if enacted clumsily or improperly.

In contexts without previously established interpersonal relationships, knowing whether individuals really are being “true to themselves” is especially difficult, since observers have few cues at their disposal to determine the “trueness” of the self they are viewing. Yet as described in a recent article on the increasing demand for authenticity among politicians: “We persist in deciding who people authentically are even though we often get it wrong — and even when it’s ultimately beside the point” (Szalai, 2016). Yet being truly authentic in workplace settings—especially in brief, fleeting interactions with high demands for self-enhancement – has the
potential to backfire because individuals may see admonitions to be authentic as an excuse to reduce their levels of emotional labor, which is key to success. A more successful form of authentic expression in organizations may be not what we think of as conveying one’s “true” or a “whole self” in the purest sense, but rather a bounded authentic impression – one that is staged to seem authentic or genuine, but also clearly conforms to the key demands or needs of the role or organization.

Hypothesis 1: Expectations of authenticity in a brief, evaluative professional situation will be negatively associated with others’ evaluations of performance, because individuals engage in less emotional regulation.

Gender differences in cultivated authenticity in professional interactions

Decades of scholarship have identified the ubiquitous dilemmas that women face in organizations when it comes to presenting themselves effectively. In situations such as negotiating a pay raise (Bowles & Babcock, 2013) or attaining leadership roles (Bowles, 2012; Heilman, 2001), women encounter unique, sometimes paradoxical constraints in terms of their self-expression. This well-documented “double bind” suggests that in many professional contexts women need to master and enact multiple, seemingly conflicting self-presentational goals (Ibarra, Ely, & Kolb, 2013), such as being seen as both agentic and communal (Bowles & Babcock, 2013). As a whole, this body of work has painted a relatively grim picture for female leaders: these challenges are likely to be stable, persistent hurdles that will continue to negatively shape career success and trajectory.

However, some recent research has also highlighted the unique ways in which women can craft their situation or behavior to overcome professional obstacles. For example, when
situations such as negotiations are framed in a way that is less constrained or more ambiguous, women do less well than when the setting is highly structured (Bowles, Babcock, & McGinn, 2005). Similarly, when women’s gender is made less salient through “gender blindness” – that is, downplaying differences between women and men – they gain confidence and are able to close the gap in a number of male-dominated organizational situations (Martin & Phillips, 2017). Moreover, particularly talented or high potential women may experience a premium that men do not in some contexts (Leslie, Manchester, & Dahm, 2017).

Despite these promising insights, the complex self-presentational expectations that women face at work have been (understandably) cast in an almost uniformly negative light. In short, research suggests that because the impressions that women need to strike to be successful are more complex - and therefore harder to navigate - women are less likely to succeed at them. An alternative perspective would suggest, however, that given their frequent and repetitive experiences with such complex demands in a myriad of situations, women may be both more aware of, and adept at, cultivating multidimensional impressions. For example, women leaders are often required to seem both communal yet agentic, soft yet strong, emotionally intuitive yet rational. Because these norms are more difficult to enact– a tightrope trickier to traverse – this may uniquely prepare women to interpret and enact these goals more effectively in the future. Accordingly, compared with men in the same situation, women may be able to cultivate an authentic impression – or try to “be themselves” – but do so in a way that doesn’t undermine their professionalism. They will instead be alert to subtle cues suggesting that a more nuanced self-presentational approach is advisable. In addition, they may also be more skilled than men at enacting such nuanced and complex self-presentational goals, while better hiding the fact that they are actively cultivating their image.
Using this logic, I hypothesize that women’s frequent experiences with various forms of a double-bind— which require them to accomplish seemingly paradoxical self-presentational goals—may make them more aware of, and adept at, workplace demands for bounded authenticity, or seeming true to one’s self without undermining professionalism. On the other hand, given their general lack of exposure to double-bind scenarios, men will be more likely to interpret instructions to “be authentic” or “be true to yourself” in a less-nuanced way, that is, as a suggestion to engage in raw authenticity and to reduce their emotional regulation (including even the most useful and effective version, i.e., deep acting). Women, conversely, will view this directive more tentatively, and carry out a version of authenticity that involves deep acting while also trying to fulfill the demands called for by the role or situation.

Hypothesis 2a: Gender moderates the relationship between expected authenticity and performance, such that purposeful efforts to appear authentic in professional contexts is more detrimental to men’s than women’s performance.

Hypothesis 2b: Emotional regulation mediates the moderated relationship between attempted authenticity and performance, such that men engage in less deep acting than women when trying to seem authentic, and this reduced emotional regulation more negatively impacts performance.

METHOD

To test whether trying to act authentically is an effective strategy in brief, evaluative professional interactions, I had participants film a brief (up to ninety seconds) video pitch for a hypothetical job at a fictional consulting agency. Participants were randomly assigned to receive “insider tips” about whether the organization preferred individuals who presented as 1) authentic, 2) professional, 3) both authentic and professional, or 4) no tip (control condition). Participants were allowed to record their pitch up to four times. After filming, they rated their own psychological experience and perceptions of performance while doing the interview. Their
performance was rated by two domain experts (directors in career services whose primary role is
to prepare job applicants for interviews).

**Sample and Procedure**

350 undergraduate participants were recruited by the behavioral lab of a northeastern
university to take part in the study; they were paid $10 per hour for their participation (plus
additional options for bonus pay for the top two videos as described below). For the first part of
the study, participants were taken into a private soundproof cubicle to film their video pitches.
They were informed that a group of university faculty, career services advisors, and graduate
student mentors are in the process of creating a new support center to help students secure the
right job for them by providing coaching, mentorship, and support. As part of this process, they
are having students do a brief pitch to a prospective employer about why they are a great fit for
the job, which will be videotaped and evaluated by career counseling and industry experts for
their effectiveness and the likelihood of students being hired. They were also informed that the
top two participants would receive $25 Amazon gift cards in bonus pay to add an additional
incentive for strong performance (the winners did indeed receive these gift cards at the end of
data collection). Participants then read a description of a summer internship at High Impact
Associates (HIA). Responsibilities included “identifying key trends in information” and
“translating these insights into recommendations” while desired qualities included: “leadership
skills”, “effective prioritization” and “organization amidst many moving parts”, which were
adapted from the role descriptions for internship positions at consulting firms to which many
students across disciplines and programs apply.
Following the role description, participants were randomly assigned to receive one of three “insider tips” (or no tip) which served as the experimental manipulation. The tip provided participants with additional information about the type of candidate that the organization desires. These tips were intended to encourage participants to try to seem authentic, to seem professional, or to portray both qualities. The beginning of the tip read: “In addition to fulfilling the requirements for the job, Career Services has emphasized that HIA traditionally looks for candidates…”: a) *(authentic condition)* “…who behave in a way that is true to themselves (i.e. authentic) at work. They prefer that employees feel comfortable showing their “real” self at work, and don’t just conform to a certain way of being to impress other colleagues or clients”; b) *(professional condition)* “…who behave in a way that is highly professional at work. They prefer that their employees always convey a polished self, and will go out of their way to ensure they will make a good impression on colleagues and clients”; c) *(professional and authentic condition)* “…who behave in a way that is both true to themselves (i.e. authentic) and highly professional at work. They prefer that employees feel comfortable showing their “real” self at work, but will also go out of their way to ensure they will make a good impression on colleagues and clients; or d) no insider tip received – they filmed their pitch based only on the job description.

Participants were then asked to indicate that they had carefully read the instructions and insider tip (if applicable), and told that they could use the webcam to record their video up to four times. They were also told not to delete or save any videos themselves. Upon completion, they alerted a research associate that they were finished. The RA then led them to a different computer to complete the follow-up survey about their experience when filming the interview. Participants who opted out of having their video used in the study (an option they were given
after completing it, due to the personal sensitivity of the data) (n = 67) were removed from the dataset, leaving 283 participants with full data. Of those 283, 16 failed the manipulation check, and 4 had corrupted or unusable video data, resulting in a usable N of 263 (66% women).

Measures

Unless otherwise indicated, all items used a 7-point Likert-type scale anchored at 1 = disagree strongly and 7 = agree strongly.

Instruction comprehension (Manipulation Check 1)

To indicate whether they read and remembered the insider tip, participants were asked to fill in a) an open-ended question “Did you receive an insider tip? If so, what did it say? Please enter a brief summary below” and b) a multiple-choice question “Please choose the most appropriate option(s) below regarding the instructions you received (check as many as apply).” Options included: “be authentic”, “be professional”, “be both authentic and professional”, and “did not receive an insider tip”.

Authentic vs. professional impression attempts (Manipulation Check 2)

Adherence to the insider tip’s instructions was also measured with 6 items, including three items measuring attempted authenticity, including “I tried to appear authentic”, “I made a concerted effort to seem like my true self” and “I tried to look as though I was just being myself” (α = .85) and three items for attempted professionalism, including “I tried to appear professional”, “I made an effort to convey a polished image” , and “I really tried to make a good impression to potential colleagues”. (α = .84).
Felt Authenticity

Felt authenticity was measured with three written items and one visual item (adapted from Sedikides et al. 2017). Written items included “I was actually my true self in the elevator pitch”; “I was really being me during the elevator pitch” and “I was truly authentic in the way I acted during the elevator pitch”. (α = .96). Authenticity was measured visually with overlapping circles asking participants to select the degree of overlap between their “video self” and their “actual self”.

Emotional Labor (Surface Acting and Deep Acting)

Emotional labor, including both surface and deep acting, was measured using the appropriate subscales from Brotheridge and Lee’s (2003) emotional labor scale. The items were adapted to pertain to the interview specifically (“please indicate your agreement with the following statements about your pitch”). Sample items included “I resisted expressing my true feelings” and “I hid my true feelings” for surface acting (α = .9) and “I made an effort to actually feel the emotions that I needed to display” and “I really tried to feel the emotions I felt I have to show to get the job” for deep acting (α = .9).

Performance: Performance was rated by two associate directors of career services in the same university, each of which had over a decade of experience working with students to optimize their performance in job interviews. Performance was a composite of five questions, each rated on a 1-7 Likert scale, which were partially adapted from Goodwin et al. 2014, including: “How positive or negative is your overall impression of this person?”; “How effective was this person's job pitch?”; “How impressive or unimpressive are this person's abilities?”; “How competent does this person seem?” and “How likely would this person be to get hired for this role”? (α = .98 and
.93 for each rater, respectively, correlation between the raters’ scores on the overall composite is .42). The two raters’ scores were averaged for each participant to serve as their overall performance score.

*Interpersonal attributions:* In addition to the above performance measures, the experts also rated warmth, morality, and authenticity with one item measures: “how warm or cold does this person seem”; “how good or bad does this person’s character seem” (from Goodwin et al. 2014), and “how authentic does this person seem?”

**RESULTS**

Authenticity and professionalism were coded as separate factors (either 0 or 1) and therefore a 2 (authentic or not) x 2 (professional versus not) x 2 (gender) ANOVA was run. There was a significant interaction between attempted authenticity and professionalism on performance, $F(1, 255) = 4.19, p = .042$. Overall, individuals performed the strongest in the “no tip” condition or the absence of instructions to be either authentic or professional ($M = 24.27, SD = 5.71$), compared to when they were only encouraged to be authentic ($M = 22.44, SD = 5.81$), only professional ($M = 22.2, SD = 5.32$), or both authentic and professional ($M = 23.1, SD = 4.83$). Thus, there is only partial support for Hypothesis 1 – that trying to be authentic can backfire in terms of other’s evaluations. It appears that both trying to be authentic and trying to be professional (and both simultaneously) can impede performance compared to receiving no additional instructions for how to act. When it comes to trying to do well in a very brief evaluative situation, it may have been challenging to think through and enact self-presentational instructions (even when they encouraged individuals to be themselves).
An examination how men versus women performed, and how this differed by condition, provides a more complex story regarding the relationship between attempted authenticity and performance. There was a main effect of gender on performance $F(1, 255) = 5.88, p = .016$; ratings of men ($M = 21.97, SD = 5.9$) were lower than ratings of women ($M = 23.55, SD = 5.2$). In support of Hypothesis 2a, there was a significant interaction between attempted authenticity and gender $F(1, 255) = 5.77, p = .017$: gender differences in performance were entirely driven by conditions in which individuals were attempting to be authentic. Men prompted to be authentic ($M = 20.32, SD = 6.21$) performed significantly worse than women prompted to be authentic ($M = 23.75, SD = 4.70$), but there were no significant differences between men ($M = 23.21, SD = 5.4$) and women ($M = 23.34, SD = 5.75$) when they were not prompted to be authentic (i.e. only professional, or no insider tip). This difference held even when participants were also prompted to be authentic and professional simultaneously.  

To examine whether differences in the degree of skilled emotional regulation, or deep acting, may be driving gender differences in performance, I first ran an additional 2 (authentic vs. not authentic) x 2 (professional vs. not professional) x 2 (gender) ANOVA to examine how the degree of deep and surface acting differ across these conditions. Results indicated a main effect of both authenticity $F(1, 259) = 4.51, p = .035$ and professionalism $F(1, 259) = 3.97, p = .047$ on surface acting, but no interaction with gender – that is, men and women report lower surface acting overall when attempting to be authentic ($M = 7.64, SD = 3.45$) vs. not attempting to be authentic ($M = 8.69, SD = 4.18$) and higher surface acting when prompted to be authentic.
professional ($M = 8.61, SD = 4.18$) versus not prompted to be professional ($M = 7.61, SD = 4.18$). However, for deep acting there was a significant interaction between gender and authenticity $F(1, 259) = 5.36, p = .021$. Specifically, men report significantly less deep acting when prompted to be authentic ($M = 9.95, SD = 4.4$) versus when they are not prompted to be authentic ($M = 12.25, SD = 4.21$) while women do not experience this difference – their deep acting is not different when told to be authentic ($M = 12.24, SD = 4.22$) versus not ($M = 12.0, SD = 4.2$). The pattern of means in deep acting mirror the differences in performance according to gender and condition.

*Mediation Analyses*

Hypothesis 2b (conditional indirect effects, i.e. moderated mediation) reflects Edwards and Lambert’s (2007) *first stage moderation model*: deep acting mediates the relationship between trying to seem authentic and performance, and gender moderates the path from trying to seem authentic to deep acting. Thus, the indirect effect of deep acting is hypothesized to be conditional on gender. As recommended by Edwards and Lambert (2007), I generated 95% bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence intervals to assess the significance of the conditional indirect effects. I used Hayes’ (2012) PROCESS macro (Model 7) for SPSS to conduct these analyses.

In support of hypothesis 2b, the conditional indirect effects of trying to seem authentic on performance via deep acting indicate a significant negative effect for men ($\beta = -.40, SE = .28, 95\% CI [-1.2, -.03]$) but not for women ($\beta = .06, SE = .13, 95\% CI [-.11, .44]$). The 95% CI for the overall index of moderated mediation did not contain zero, thus the overall model was significant ($\beta = .46, SE = .35, 95\% CI [.03, 1.5]$).
DISCUSSION

Seeming as if one is being true to oneself has been established not only as a positive intrapsychic phenomenon, but also a successful interpersonal strategy across a range of domains such as friendship, dating, and political campaigns. Increasingly, the importance of perceived authenticity or being one’s “whole self” in professional settings has gained considerable traction and attention by both researchers and practitioners (Caza et al, 2017; Dumas & Sanchez-Burks, 2015; Hahl & Zuckerman, 2014). Yet, this seemingly straightforward advice (after all, how challenging can it be to simply be oneself?) fails to account for some of the potential downsides that may come with behaving in a way that is actually authentic when there are clear expectations for desired behavior. These challenges may be especially apparent in brief professional interactions with high demands for self-enhancement (e.g. job interviews or other brief exchanges) in which actors don’t have a chance to build genuine and deep relationships over time, but rather have to strike a balance between authenticity and professionalism in cultivating a first impression. Extant work has suggested that behaving authentically (or purposefully cultivating an authentic impression) can be valuable and even advisable, but only when the content of this authenticity fits within the bounds of what is also desirable or acceptable behavior. Given the constraints that may make informal relationships and deep self-disclosure problematic in many organizational contexts (Gibson, 2018; Pillemer & Rothbard, 2018), the value of acting authentically may not be fully realized in these brief first impressions, and is likely to depend on the way in which this authenticity is enacted.

The present study explores whether purposefully cultivating an authentic impression is a useful self-presentational strategy in brief interactions, or whether this approach may backfire
when attempted authenticity undermines professionalism. I hypothesize and find gender differences in the tendency to enact authenticity, or trying to be oneself by reducing emotional regulation (both surface acting and deep acting) and “bounded” authenticity, by trying to seem authentic while still engaging in skilled emotional regulation (i.e. only deep acting). When prompted to seem authentic in a professional setting with high norms for self-enhancement, men engage in a more unregulated form of self-presentation, and as a result their performance suffers when they are attempting to enact this goal. Women, however, are more likely to engage in skilled emotional regulation even when told to “be true to themselves.” In other words, they do not see cultivating an authentic impression in a professional setting as an invitation to reduce their levels of skilled emotional regulation – they recognize that seeming like one’s true self requires conscious cultivation and skilled interpersonal work.

Theoretical Contributions

A recent surge of both popular press and scholarship has extolled the benefits of being true to oneself, and revealing one’s “whole self,” across a range of professional contexts. However, work that focuses on the interpersonal implications of these admonitions suggests a more complex story. Workers may struggle with how to communicate their real or “true” inner selves when there are also high demands for impression management (Caza et al. 2017; Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Moreover, authenticity may only be beneficial when the revealed self actually fits with the demands of the role (Moore et al., 2015). The present study builds upon this recent stream of research on the potential challenges or downsides to being perceived as authentic. By experimentally exploring the relationship between purposefully cultivating an authentic impression and other’s evaluations in brief interactions with high demands for self-enhancement,
this work helps to clarify the causal relationship between attempted authenticity and evaluations of effectiveness.

Specifically, these results highlight a paradox of trying to seem authentic to others in professional settings: that doing so successfully (i.e. without undermining evaluations of one’s proficiency or adequacy for a job) involves actively managing, or cultivating, an authentic impression by also engaging in skilled deep acting. These results distinguish between the success of attempts at cultivating authenticity that are “raw” and emotionally unregulated, versus those that are “bounded,” involving skilled deep acting. The present study highlights how just being your unfiltered self can potentially backfire in situations in which one also has to maintain a polished or professional impression. In the midst of admonishments to be one’s whole, authentic self in all types of professional settings, individuals must endeavor to carefully cultivate a bounded authentic impression that doesn’t undermine others’ evaluations of their performance.

The present study also extends work on gender differences in impression management in organizations. Specifically, these findings shed light on how men and women may have differing interpretations of and subsequent reactions to how to “be true to oneself” in organizational settings. Men and women may have unique constructions of what it means to cultivate an authentic impression - especially when one is also trying to perform a task that requires a certain degree of polish, such as interviewing for a job at a professional services firm. Women appear to be better equipped to recognize and grapple with the apparent paradox of bounded authenticity, and enact this sort of impression more effectively than their male counterparts, whose performance suffered in authentic conditions due to reduced levels of skilled emotional regulation. This extends recent work which highlights the conditions under which women can
overcome potential biases in organizations, even amidst apparent barriers and “double binds” (e.g. Martin & Phillips, 2018; Rudman & Phelan, 2008). When it comes to seeming authentic, it may be that women’s experience with often paradoxical self-presentational constraints make them well-equipped to cultivate an authentic impression that makes them appear both “real” and professional.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several important limitations that are also opportunities for future research. First, the research context provided a controlled setting to examine the impact of attempted authenticity on external perceptions of performance. However, because it was carried out in a laboratory setting with a student population, external validity is limited. Future work should examine the role of perceived authenticity in field settings – including both traditional organizational contexts and other types of professional situations that are becoming increasingly common. Several of my works in progress examine the role of perceived authenticity in first impressions in field settings – including on social media (Twitter and Instagram) as well as in professional networking contexts. These studies will help to illuminate the ways in which individuals attempt to cultivate authentic impressions in contexts that also have high demands for self-enhancement, and the conditions under which these attempts are successful.

Second, an unexpected finding revealed that receiving no additional instructions for how to prepare a successful job pitch (the control condition) was associated with the best performance ratings overall. It may be particularly challenging to purposefully develop a tailored self-presentational strategy—authentic or professional—under limited time and situational constraints. The present study was a first step towards understanding the causal relationship
between purposely cultivated authenticity and performance; new research should examine how this plays out in a more diverse range of professional contexts.

In addition, this study sheds light on one important psychological mechanism that explains when attempted authenticity may backfire for potential job candidates. Self-reported deep acting was the key psychological mechanism that determined whether job pitches were rated as less effective. Future work should identify the precise external behaviors that evaluators pick up on when making these evaluations. In the present study, some preliminary data with a third expert coder suggests that behavioral patterns, or “authenticity signals,” differed between men and women in the authentic conditions. Specifically, men were more likely to view authenticity as nonconformity, which was rated unfavorably by performance evaluators. Future work (including my dissertation work in progress) will identify the signals that others consciously or unconsciously enact when trying to “seem” authentic, and how others view these signals in professional contexts.

Finally, the present study suggested some compelling differences between men versus women’s attempts to “seem” authentic in professional contexts. The finding that men are more inclined to engage in unregulated behavior as compared to women when told to be themselves has important implications for understanding gender differences in performance in professional contexts. Future work should continue to explore this difference to better understand why women and men might differ in both their interpretations of “seeming authentic,” and in their ability to cultivate impressions that are simultaneously authentic and polished. One limitation of the present exploration is that the women and men in the sample were all relatively low-status – they were college students applying for entry level positions. Some extant work on the positive effects
of signaling authenticity through non-conformity and vulnerability are focused mainly on the potential benefits for individuals who are already in relatively high-status positions (Belleza, Gino, & Keinan, 2013). Future work will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the role played by status (both ascribed and achieved) when gauging the impact of signaling authenticity to others in professional settings.

Practical implications and conclusion

A common admonishment across many interpersonal situations is to “just be yourself.” Often the implicit message in this ubiquitous advice is not just to do so because it feels good, but also because this is an advantageous interpersonal strategy. But is being yourself always appealing to others in professional settings? The present study suggests that cultivating an authentic image might not always be a good idea, especially in brief, evaluative contexts in which people do not have prior experience with the focal actor. Individuals should take care and caution in how they display the “authentic” aspects of their personality, and when possible, try to ensure that they maintain the appropriate levels of emotional regulation. This may be particularly true in brief interactions, in which some of the interpersonal benefits of authenticity, such as building trust and liking, might not be especially relevant. In particular, men should be aware of the pitfalls of achieving authenticity through reduced emotional labor and increased nonconformity, and consider how they might be able to be themselves in a more regulated fashion that simultaneously achieves goals of both seeming authentic and professional. Women, conversely, might view their past experience with cultivating paradoxical self-presentational goals as a potential advantage when it comes to these challenging interpersonal situations.
In addition, a number of prominent leaders and well-known organizational cultures highlight the critical importance of bringing your whole self to work, suggesting that this may become less of a personal choice or interpersonal style, and more of a performance requirement. Just as strongly encouraging fun (Mollick & Rothbard, 2014) or friendship (Pillemer & Rothbard, 2018) may be viewed as having only positive consequences by organizational leaders, this research illuminates unintended downsides. As such, leaders should exercise caution when encouraging employees to reveal their authentic selves, as this can be challenging for some, and could potentially undermine productivity and performance. Moreover, there may be an important distinction between cultivating authenticity in your ongoing professional relationships, as opposed to brief interactions in which first impressions are paramount. Even when given the advice to “be yourself,” individuals should heed this advice with caution in such contexts.

Moreover, technological advances are rapidly altering the way individuals collaborate and connect at work and influencing the manner in which they are evaluated. For example, organizations such as Goldman Sachs and Unilever and academic institutions such as the University of Chicago now use videos in place of real-life interviews, and algorithms to determine performance instead of human attributions (Feloni, 2017; Kmetz, 2018). These advances are touted as saving time and reducing bias – and therefore as being advantageous for both organizations and would-be members. However, these technological changes also raise new issues in terms of how to convey important and complex interpersonal information in brief, unidirectional, and virtual interactions (Leonardi & Vaast, 2017). As such, both individuals and institutions need to be mindful of how the changing nature of work impacts not only the content of tasks, but also how we make attributions and connect to others.
Overall, authenticity is a powerful construct that is pervasive in Western culture. While there are clearly many relational advantages to being oneself, the present study highlights how being truly authentic may be challenging and even potentially detrimental to performance in organizational contexts. When it comes to seeming authentic, it might be wise to do so in a manner that paradoxically involves conscious regulation in order to best succeed.
REFERENCES


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