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Impossible Selves: Image Strategies and  
Identity Threat in Professional -  
Women's Career Transitions

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**Impossible Selves: Image Strategies and Identity Threat in Professional  
Women's Career Transitions**

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**ABSTRACT**

This article uses the notion of identity threat to explain gender differences in responses to the image and identity gap created by professional's transition into client advisory roles. While both men and women experienced this gap, the strategies used to bridge it differed by gender, and so did their consequences. Women were less likely than men to report access to suitable role models, and accordingly were less likely than men to use imitation strategies in fashioning "provisional selves" to fill the gap. Lacking suitable models, women were also more likely than men to engage in "protective" self-presentation: behavior geared toward avoiding disapproval. Men, by contrast, were more likely to engage in "acquisitive" self-presentation, defined as behavior aimed at eliciting approval. We develop a conceptual framework in which relational and organizational demography moderate the relationship between identity threat and image strategies, which in turn reduce or augment the perceived threat. Conditions of threat combined with relatively impermeable group boundaries, we argue, transform organizational models of success into "impossible selves" for professional women.

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An important part of assuming a work role is acting and looking the part (Becker and Carper 1956, Becker and Strauss 1956, Hochschild 1983). These role-related expectations, or "display rules" (Rafaeli and Sutton 1989), confer legitimacy upon the role-holder (Goffman 1956). As people make transitions into new organizational roles, they also strive to convey images that conform to prototypic characteristics of those new roles (Ibarra 1999). By their demeanor, they attempt to signal the competence and effectiveness that will win them deference or approval from members of their role-set (Goffman 1956).

What demeanor becomes prototypic is affected heavily by the demographic composition of a firm, since the content of a role is shaped by the characteristics of the group that occupies the role in largest numbers (Baron and Pfeffer 1994, Creed, Scully and Austin 2002, Ely 1995, Kanter 1977). Not surprisingly, since women still make up less than seventeen percent of executives in Fortune 500 firms (Catalyst 2005), lack of access to role models and "inappropriate image" are still cited as a common career derailment factor for women but not for men (Catalyst 2007). How women respond to the image requirements of traditionally male roles then becomes an important question. Yet few empirical studies to date investigate directly the processes by which minority status affects what image and identity strategies people use to adapt to the demands of their organizational roles.

This article uses the notion of identity threat to explain gender differences in responses to the image and identity gap created by professional's transition into client advisory roles. While both men and women experienced this gap, and resulting threat to their previously successful professional identity, the image strategies used to bridge it differed by gender, as did their consequences. Building on existing ideas about

skewed demographic contexts (Baron and Pfeffer 1994, Kanter 1977), we outline the image and identity construction processes that reduce the likelihood that the women will respond to the perceived threat by acquiring a demeanor that conforms to display rules for professional success. Exploring a specific context – client encounters – in which image strategies are paramount, we argue that the transition into client advisory roles results in an additional identity threat to women in the form of a devaluation or disconfirmation of their gender identities.

The term identity refers here to a person's work-related self-definition, i.e., the attributes, groups, roles and professional/occupational experiences by which people define themselves in a work role (Schein, 1979). Work identities are shaped by how a person's social entourage understands and views him or her; as such, they are claimed and granted in social interaction (Bartel and Dutton 2001, Goffman 1956). An important aspect of a person's work identity is situated in the future, as a person's set of possible selves – images about who they might become, would like to become, or fear becoming (Markus and Nurius 1986). Our central argument is that demographic conditions moderate the image management and identity construction processes that legitimize and reproduce certain "success models" while discrediting others. Together, these processes transform organizational models of success into "impossible selves" for women working in demographically skewed professional organizations.

The paper is organized into three major sections. Given the theory generating nature of our work, we begin with the research setting and data collection methods: a pair of qualitative and inductive studies of junior-level management consultants and investment bankers in the midst of career transitions that require them to interact with clients as representatives of their firms. The second section reports the contrast in how men and women used image and identity strategies to gain credibility and elicit deference from their clients. In this section we combine emergent themes from the qualitative data analysis with concepts and findings from social identity theory to develop a conceptual framework in which relational and organizational demography moderate the

relationship between identity threat and image strategies, which in turn reduce or augment the perceived threat. The third and final section develops the idea of impossible selves, speculating beyond the current findings and suggesting avenues for future research.

## **CONTEXT AND METHODS**

The perspective developed here is grounded in two qualitative studies of junior consultants and investment bankers undergoing a career transition from analytic (individual contributor) and project management roles to boundary-spanning roles managing client relationships. The purpose of the study was to develop theory and hypotheses about the process of adaptation in career transitions and to explore whether these differ by gender. Interest in the relationships between gender, image and identity work was not fueled by deductive logic or hypothesis testing, but by the prominence of these issues in participants' accounts of the career challenges they faced, and the striking difference in men's and women's responses to these concerns.

Career transitions in professional service work are particularly suited for exploring identity construction processes because image displays are of such central importance. In this context, adherence to display rules is especially critical for effective performance because a firm's success depends on employees' ability to generate revenues. Generating revenues, in turn, hinges on the professional's ability to convey an image of competence and credibility to prospective clients for several reasons (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993). First, the professional represents the firm to clients; he or she must embody the firm's identity. Second, the value of the services rendered are relatively intangible and difficult to evaluate objectively, making image a proxy for quality. Uncertainty places a premium on the outward appearance of being "the right sort of person" (Kanter 1977). Third, client encounters have important and complex self-presentation demands because it is difficult to anticipate what will transpire in the course of the interaction. Style and substance, in sum, are intertwined

such that a firm's performance and, consequently, the success of a professional's career, can hinge on self-presentation (Ibarra 1999).

**Firms.** This research was conducted in two professional services firms – an investment bank and a management consulting firm. The investment bank was a large securities firm, which employed about 1000 professionals, providing a full range of financial services including investment banking, sales and trading of securities, and research. The study focused on its investment banking division. The management consulting firm was a rapidly growing, but relatively small elite firm. At the time of the study, it employed approximately 350 professionals. Both firms had extensive international operations with offices worldwide, both listed prominently in surveys of leading firms in their respective fields and both recruited exclusively from top-tier business schools.

**Work Roles and Career Progression.** Consulting and investment banking are similar in consisting of project and client advisory work. Management consultants begin their careers performing analytic work and providing support to the rest of the team. They progress to a conceptual and managerial role, in which they must translate the information they have gathered from clients into a problem diagnosis and specific action plan that they apportion and delegate to their junior colleagues who perform the actual analysis. New team leaders rely heavily on a senior partner for strategic guidance and managing key client meetings or presentations; with experience, they are expected to handle an increasing share of both. Over time, they move into a client advisory role, in which they are expected to generate “roll-over” business – new projects for the same client or firm. Partners are expected to generate new consulting business.

As in consulting, in investment banks the work revolves around the project or “deal.” Analysts and associates develop financial models and perform the routine tasks of putting together a deal. As Vice Presidents individuals are responsible for managing the transaction from beginning to end, coordinating the efforts of

relevant internal staff such as equity researchers, analysts, and sales and trading personnel. In these managerial roles, they begin to serve as brokers between their firms and the client, handling day-to-day contact with people at their level at the client firm, managing their junior colleagues, and bringing the senior professional who is in charge of the transaction into the process on an “as needed” basis. They are expected at this point to begin to cultivate relationships with clients, so that they are able to discern opportunities to sell them “follow-on” business. The transition from Vice President to Director and Managing Director entails moving into a client advisory role, and eventually, generating new investment banking business.

**Career paths and Demographics.** In the investment banks, MBAs are hired as Associates. Less than ten percent of new associates entering the investment banking division of our research site were women.<sup>1</sup> The first promotion, to Vice President, typically occurs four years later, although a “superstar” might be promoted after three years. About 18 percent of Vice presidents were women. The second promotion, to Director, occurs in the seventh or eighth year. Both are “up or out” decisions, since those who are not promoted must leave. The last promotion, to Managing Director, is more variable; it is based on both departmental and individual revenues generated. Six and nine percent of Managing Directors and Directors, respectively, were women.

Titles vary across firms in consulting, but the progression is similar. Undergraduates and new MBAs perform analyst roles. Of these new entrants, 35 percent were women. Two to three years after the MBA, the junior consultant begins to take on team management responsibility, typically assuming the title of “team leader” after performing effectively in that capacity for some time. About 20 percent of team leaders were women. The second promotion, to “client account manager,” can occur anytime between the fifth and eighth year. About five percent of those in transition to client account manager were women. The consulting firm studied did not have a fixed “up or out” system: promotion times were tailored to individual capacity; however those not performing at a level appropriate for their cohort were encouraged to leave the firm. The final promotion

to Director entailed becoming a partner; the timetable was also variable and depended on revenues generated. Women comprised only seven percent of the firm's partners.

**Preliminary Interviews.** To ensure familiarization with the firms in question, the research began with five open-ended interviews with three seniors and two HR professionals in the investment bank and three interviews with two seniors and one HR professional in the consulting firm. These interviews were used to elicit observations about key success and derailment factors for junior people and career development practices in the firms. In these interviews, the themes of image and identity first emerged. These “informants” also facilitated the selection of the participants for the full study and helped to define the cohorts that would represent the career junctures of greatest theoretical relevance.

Based on these initial observations and promotion/evaluation criteria, it was decided to investigate the two critical junctures before the Partner or Director level. In both organizations, the first transition is from an analytic or technical role to a project management role; the second, from project to client management. Analysis of both cohorts was, however, combined, because at both levels performance evaluation criteria included evidence of one's potential to perform in a client management capacity in the future. As well, those who showed aptitude were permitted to assume client facing roles very early in their careers. Thus, although none of the junior professionals in this study had fully assumed a client management role, they were evaluated not only on their technical and managerial competencies but also a range of qualities associated with building credibility in their client relationships.

**Participants.** For convenience, selection of participants was limited to employees in the central office of each firm (both in the Northeastern United States) and to one other large, regional office. In both firms, we sampled people just *before* the identified career transitions. In total, nineteen management consultants and

fifteen investment bankers participated. The participants included two cohorts: 6 bankers and 6 consultants in transition to Vice President and team leader roles, and 9 bankers and 13 consultants in transition to Director and client account manager roles, respectively.

The participant group over-sampled women to ensure that the transition experiences of men and women could be compared<sup>ii</sup>. Because women are highly under-represented in both industries (particularly past the associate level), it was not able to draw a random sample of female professionals. Thus, the full population of women at each of the two transition points were identified at both firms and all but one participated in the research study. We randomly selected an equivalent number of men at the same transition points. The final group included 8 women and 11 men from the consulting firm and 7 women and 8 men from the investment bank.<sup>iii</sup>

Apart from their gender, the participant group was fairly homogeneous demographically. The investment bankers were all Caucasian Americans, except for a European woman and a Japanese man, both long-time US residents. The consultant group included two Indian men and two Asian-American women. All held MBAs from top business schools: Chicago, Columbia, Harvard, INSEAD, MIT, Northwestern, NYU, Stanford, Wharton, and Yale. The one exception was a woman investment banker who had a JD from UC Berkeley. Within cohort, the participants were all approximately the same age.<sup>iv</sup>

Although we did not collect data on the demographics of client firms, the senior informants reported that most of the clients were men; this was corroborated in the interviews with participants—of the 15 women participants, only three reported having had a woman client.<sup>v</sup>

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

**Semi-structured Interviews.** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 34 participations, these typically lasted 90 minutes, ranging from 60 minutes to over two hours. Approximately half were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. In the remaining cases, when the participant requested that the interview not be recorded, the first author took extensive hand-written notes, which were transcribed at the earliest possible time after the interview. Exhibit One provides the interview protocol.

**Data Analysis.** Data analysis followed an inductive theory development process (Eisenhardt 1989, Glaser and Strauss 1967, Rafaeli and Sutton 1991). The point of departure for the current paper was the marked gender difference in the image management strategies that emerged from a prior study of the same group (Ibarra 1999). As reported by Ibarra (1999) a majority of participants described trial and error attempts to convey a more effective image in their client encounters. In the initial study these attempts were classified into two broad categories—imitation and true-to-self strategies—that were highly correlated with gender: Men were more likely than women to report using imitation strategies, while the majority of women described a true-to-self stance.<sup>vi</sup> The aim of the current paper was to develop theory about the situational factors and identity processes that might produce or reinforce these differences in image strategies.

Having identified this gender difference, we used an iterative process—moving back and forth between the data and relevant literature—to develop our emerging theory of responses to identity threat. Following the methods described by Eisenhardt (1989) and Rafaeli and Sutton (1991), and with the help of two research associates, we searched for major themes in the data and compared these themes with concepts from the literature on impression management, social networks, identity work and career socialization. The result of this analysis is our theory model, depicted in Figure 1, which is described and illustrated below.

**[Insert Figure 1 about here]**

## IMAGE GAPS AND IDENTITY THREAT

The senior informants stressed that moving into a client contact role requires the junior professional to supplement a tangible skill base with a much more elusive set of success factors. These include the ability to represent the firm, to generate novel ideas, to sell new business and to develop peer relationships with clients who would come to rely on the professional for counsel on a broad array of business issues. The following comment illustrates a senior informant's view on the range and importance of these factors and the hurdle managing them can present for the junior professional in transition in greater responsibility in managing client relationships.

*Many people reach a plateau as they struggle to become a client account manager. The challenge is to develop productive relationships with clients who are generally older than you. It requires different skills, and it comes as a big shock. You are selling yourself. You are saying, "For \$X million, the project will have my guarantee, my judgment, and my credibility." [Senior consultant]*

All study participants were highly cognizant of these facts, and men and women alike experienced anxiety about their credibility with clients and struggled to hide their feelings of inexperience and immaturity. Following Breakwell (1983), we interpret this anxiety as symptomatic of identity threat, defined as "any thought, feeling, action or experience which challenges the individual's personal and social identity". While in transition from one role to the other, our participant's identity as successful professionals was up for grabs, and this generated a sense of identity threat. The quotes below illustrate feelings expressed by a broad range of participants:

*I had a fear of talking to clients, a fear they knew I didn't know anything. I still don't know, but I'm learning to hide it... [Female investment banker]*

*My weakness is client management. I'm introverted and don't like to be rushed. I like to think it over. I don't feel comfortable saying something if I don't know what the answer is yet. I'm less comfortable challenging my clients when I don't know what they think. [Male consultant]*

This recognized image and identity gap constituted a threat to previously successful professional selves. From day one, junior professionals were required to adopt a self-presentation strategy in an attempt to portray an image which befitted their new role. As reported in Ibarra (1999) the professionals responded with several forms of identity work, notably by constructing provisional selves on the basis of role modeling (imitation strategies) or personal crafting (true-to-self strategies). As noted in Ibarra (1999), few of the women and most of the men used imitation strategies: Of the fifteen women who participated in this study, nine showed evidence of personal crafting strategies; only five of the nineteen men did so. The remaining seven women and fourteen men adopted a role modeling strategy. The two quotes below illustrate the contrast:

*"I have learned a lot about client interaction by seeing other people do it and then trying it myself. My preference is to have a large set of people as models, rather than a close few. A mosaic of different people. In each situation, I look to what I can learn from that person that I don't know now. G is a rising star who was useful on how to have the guts to confront senior people. H [was useful] for getting clients to focus on the critical issues, F for one-on-one client interactions." [Male Consultant]*

*"You have to develop your own style, to discover it yourself. I can't model myself on anyone. But there are many people who seem to have become the people they work for. They model themselves totally on the senior person. Its probably a good temporary device – as you get more confident you*

*may be able to put in more of yourself. I think you eventually arrive at something that works.”*

*[Female Consultant]*

### **Gender Differences in Responses to Identity Threat: Image Strategies**

All informants stressed that the men and women we studied were comparable in their analytic skills but that self-presentation was a significant hurdle for women. Failure to convey the expected image not only reduced women's credibility with clients but also lowered expectations that they had the potential to excel if promoted to higher positions, which required greater client contact. The following comments are exemplary:

*“A good job is expected. To be on the superstar track you have to be outspoken, brash, self-promoting. The self-promotion factor does women in.” [Senior investment banker]*

*“I have seen many women consultants with real smarts but low confidence. The big hurdle for women is not performance but how they are perceived.” [Senior consultant]*

*“Clients are old guys in the executive suite. It creates credibility problems for women. I hear it all the time that a woman doesn't have ‘presence with the clients’.” [HR vice president, investment bank]*

Though both men and women reported similar concerns about conveying an appropriate image to clients, mirroring our informant's comments, they differed significantly in their responses to these performance pressures. A striking pattern in our data was that men's and women's image strategies broke rather neatly into the acquisitive and protective styles described by (Arkin 1981). Arkin (1981) proposes two different types of strategies. “Acquisitive” self-presentation entails soliciting approval by ascertaining and signaling

those traits that are most likely to result in deference from the pertinent audience. “Protective” self-presentation, by contrast, involves attempts to avoid disapproval. Individuals engage in protective self-presentation when they believe that the potential benefits of acquisitive strategies are outweighed by their risks. The behavioral forms associated with protective self-presentation include modesty, reluctance to interact with others freely and actively, and a propensity towards neutral, uncertain and qualified expressions of judgment such that the impression conveyed is "unassailable."

In client interactions, acquisitive strategies consist of active, aggressive attempts to signal credibility. Protective strategies, by contrast, entail “laying low” so as to avoid making a negative first impression on a client. Professionals behave protectively in order to “buy time,” such that they can demonstrate their competence with the results they produce rather than by the immediate demeanor that serves a “signal” for their potential to produce quality work. In the present research context, the choice between acquisitive and protective self-presentation is consequential and problematic for women. The ability to win client confidence facilitates career advancement, while the use of protective self-presentation confirms gender stereotypes that may lead to career stagnation.

We coded as “acquisitive” those participants who either expressed confidence and ease in their client interactions or reported efforts to display a confident image and to conform to their firm’s display rules, even in the face of their insecurities about their lack of experience. We coded as “protective” those participants who described strategies characterized by conservatism, modesty and efforts to avoid relying on image or first impressions to convey credibility. Each participant’s transcript was coded by the first author and a research assistant; inter-coder reliability was .86. Discrepancies between the two coders were resolved through discussion. These discrepancies involved accounts in which it was difficult to tell whether the person was referring to interactions with clients or with colleagues, or people who described a mix of protective and acquisitive strategies. Four participants reported that they behaved acquisitively with certain

clients, with whom they had established greater rapport, but remained protective with others; we coded them as exhibiting “mixed” strategies, inferring they might be conducting image work to transition from a protective to an acquisitive style.

Of the fifteen women who participated in this study, seven showed evidence of protective self-presentation; only two of the nineteen men did so. By the same token, only three of the women used the acquisitive style, while thirteen of the men did. Three women and one man were coded as “mixed” because they reported using both protective and acquisitive styles<sup>vii</sup>. Men tended to respond to image requirements by displaying confidence and focusing their energies on increasing the likelihood of attaining the approval of clients. They also made an effort to establish personal relationships with their clients, consistent with their roles as professional service providers. The following two quotes are illustrative of acquisitive strategies:

*“I’m very good a handling clients. I come across as easy to talk to. A spin-off for a client is like a divorce, and you’re the one that has to stick by them. It gives clients confidence that my experience matters. I believe that makes me a good investment banker. The people aspect is very important to me.” [Male Investment Banker]*

*“You need to develop a sense of maturity so that you can win over clients as a peer. This is signaled through the way you act, the way you dress, the subject matter you talk about—more discussion of client’s personal interests, less on analysis....I have learned to go into a client meeting, not talk at all about the analysis, and have it be a VERY successful meeting.” [Male Consultant]*

By contrast, the most common themes among the women in the sample were their discomfort in client interactions and their reluctance to assert themselves. While the men defined the requirements of client interaction as political and stylistic, the women tended to base their credibility claims on technical

competence. Instead of using their image to make a positive first impression, the women participants were more likely to try to increase the likelihood that image would cease to be a necessary signal for their underlying competence. The most commonly reported tactics were over-preparing and seeking assignments with long time horizons, in which technical mastery would become apparent—as it might not be in a brief meeting. The quotes below illustrate the contrast:

*“I tend not to step out on a limb when I’m not fairly confident about an assertion. If I have an idea, I think to myself “oh, that’s stupid,” and I won’t say it. I end up not being as active in meetings with clients. I think to myself, “How can I tell this 55-yr old guy who’s been in the industry his whole life that his last investment was really stupid.” [Female Consultant]*

*“I’m reserved and shy walking into new client situations. I have trouble making a presence right from the start, getting noticed, and getting them to focus on the issues. It’s easier to be forceful with people that I’ve known for a long time. I focus more on the substance of what I want to get across. I’m very analytical and data-driven. I don’t tend to step out on a limb.” [Female Consultant]*

### **Situational Impacts on Women’s Image Strategies**

**Client Interactions.** The large majority of the professional’s senior clients were male. We argue that this relational demography (Tsui, III 1989) configuration affects the image strategies by its effect on three factors (1) situation uncertainty, (2) expectation of clients’ gender bias, and (3) expectations of success with acquisitive and protective strategies. Below we report the interview data which supports this argument.

The women participants reported that they often struggled to read client’s cues, whether positive or negative. This is consistent with findings indicating that cross-gender interaction tends to be characterized by less role

clarity than same gender interaction (Tsui and O'Reilly 1989). For women, client encounters constituted examples of the unstructured situations, unpredictable audiences, or difficult to ascertain performance standards that tend to produce protective self-presentations (Arkin 1981). For example, one woman noted:

*“Clients tend to be freer with male consultants. They will give them more positive and more negative feedback than they would to a female consultant. With a woman, it’s just politeness. It was never an overt thing. I just felt less connection—either positive or negative—with these people.” [Female Consultant]*

By contrast, women participants found signals and expectations much easier to read in exchanges with women clients. Consistent with research on homophily—i.e., social similarity—in interpersonal relations (e.g., Ibarra 1992, Marsden 1988), these relationships developed more quickly and smoothly:

*“I have a client right now who’s a young woman in her mid-30’s. I feel like I can talk to her and she understands me pretty well. She has been helpful in terms of telling me who we need to talk to and what they are like. For example, what their “touchy” subjects are, so that we don’t bring them up. I never used to even think about those things... It’s not just coming in, giving the report, having a brilliant answer and a perfect analysis.” [Female Consultant]*

*“Working with women clients is helpful because I think relationships tend to develop a bit faster. There is something more personal about it.” [Female Consultant]*

A second theme in the interview data was junior women’s perceptions that their clients held gender stereotypes that would place them at a disadvantage. When clients bring to the situation gender-typed expectations and biases, they are more likely to elicit gender-linked behavior from women professionals

(Deaux and Major 1987). Expectations states theory (Berger, Fisech, Norman and Selditch 1977, Meeker and Weitzel-O'Neill 1985) suggests that gender is a status characteristic that leads both men and women in mixed gender groups to assume greater task competence from men until proven otherwise. These expectations are manifested in a variety of ways, including men's preference to address themselves primarily to other men and failure to notice women's contributions (Tannen 1990). The following quote shows that the women tended to believe that being female signaled a lack of authority and competence:

*“Being female affects my ability to be impactful. When a man speaks, the message hits home clearer. He will be more persuasive, both internally and with the client. The words are more hard-hitting. I'm more soft-spoken. I think I'm more likely to get challenged on something.” [Female Consultant]*

When professional women expect their male clients to hold gender biases, they will look for those biases to reveal themselves in their interactions. Influenced by these beliefs, professional and client may negotiate a stereotypic male-female professional exchange.

Faced with an uncertain situation and the expectation that the client may hold gender biases, a competent junior woman has two strategic alternatives, which correspond to Arkin's acquisitive and protective categories. Using an acquisitive strategy, she can make a direct bid for the client's respect in the immediate encounter. Alternatively, using a protective strategy, she can attempt to not *lose* credibility so that, over time, she can demonstrate competence. As Arkin (1981) notes, when people believe that the typical, “approval seeking,” form of self-presentation will not be successful for them, or that the potential costs of the behavior are greater than its potential benefit, they are more likely to behave protectively.

The third factor that affected their choice of self-presentation strategy, therefore, was the women participants' beliefs that they would not succeed with the acquisitive style displayed by the men. These beliefs are

supported by a large body of research indicating that women using masculine leadership styles tend to be judged more negatively by both men and women than male professionals using the same leadership style (Eagley and Wood 1991, Falbo, Hazen and Linimon 1982, Nieva and Gutek 1981, Wiley and Eskilson 1982). As Schein (1973) demonstrated, the characteristics of a “good manager” are similar to those of a “typical man,” and incongruous with those of a “typical woman.” The following quote illustrates participants’ expectations of success with acquisitive and protective strategies:

*“This is a hard business for a woman to be accepted in. Clients and people who make decisions are more accepting of a man walking in. They get away with bullying and off-the-cuff reactions. It leads to women over-preparing. You have to know more and appear more responsive.” [Female investment banker]*

Because women are evaluated on their qualities as professionals and as women, they may be sanctioned for either “acting like men,” or conforming too closely to norms for female behavior—being “too timid” or “lacking presence with clients.” As a result, women in this study gave a great deal of thought to what demeanor would work for them in client interactions. Since they perceived that either “acting like a man” or “acting like a woman” would likely backfire or reduce their credibility, many chose to adopt a neutral or protective stance.

**Organizational Context.** The relational demography of client interactions was mirrored in the demographics of the employer firms -- particularly the few women at the senior level -- which resulted in a paucity of role models for the women professionals. In a skewed demographic context, uncertainty with regard to display rules is exacerbated by a scarcity of role models who can provide guidelines for behaviors that are both effective and feasible for the junior person. Many of the women we interviewed reported that available role

models' styles were either not feasible for them or incongruent with their self-concepts; as a result, few used the imitation strategies favored by their male colleagues.

Role modeling involves both cognitive and affective processes (Bandura 1986, Gibson 1996). People must not only develop a sophisticated, cognitive understanding of what specific self-presentation behaviors are effective and why they are effective; they must also determine whether those behaviors will likely produce positive consequences for them and whether they are personally appealing (Bandura 1986). The women who participated in this study were more likely than the men to report a belief that the demeanor of available role models would not work for them. They were also more likely than the men to believe that they could not develop a style based on modeling someone else, and to expect that modeling the behavior they observed to be successful in men would not produce the same positive outcomes for them. The following comment illustrates this point.

*“Men are seen as aggressive or thoughtful while women for the same behaviour are seen as whiny. I have to watch my words. I’m afraid to seem too whiny and aggressive whereas a man would be seen as fighting the battle. Will I be viewed as too aggressive if I ask for additional resources or kill myself on deals?” [Female Investment Banker]*

People may understand tacit behavioral expectations and believe that they will gain approval for conforming to those expectations, yet still be unwilling to do so because of the role's incongruence with central and valued aspects of their identity. Because people use their self-presentations to create, maintain or modify a public self that is congruent with their ideal self (Baumeister 1982), the attractiveness of role model's behavior and their degree of identification with role models significantly affects whether they will adopt the behavior (Foote 1951). Since most of their colleagues were men, the women in this study tended to experience identification and self-congruence as significant hurdles. By contrast to their male peers, they tended to note how they

differed from their associates and to state that they found it difficult to envision adopting styles that they felt to be dramatically at odds with their self-concepts.

Several of the women expressed a desire for role models who were similar to them not only in style but in character, values, and life-style choices. For them, identification, liking, and common values were critical to their ability to learn from senior colleagues, as exemplified in the following quotes.

*“X person is excellent with clients, one of the best. I worked with him trying to emulate his style but it didn’t help me. I react negatively to him as a person. Although it’s successful, I find it insincere and manipulative. I have to like my role models as individuals.” [Female Consultant]*

*“I’m starting to formulate who I work well with personality-wise and skill-wise. I’ve told two people I’d like to work with them, based on their style of conducting business and because I like them as people. I have a real problem working with people I don’t respect.” [Female Investment Banker]*

Few of the men we interviewed made comments such as these, suggesting not that identification and congruence were not important for them, but that these issues were not problematic.

### **Effects of Image Strategies on Identity Threat**

When analyzing our sample of junior professionals across their adopted image and identity work strategies we found that the common pattern was for individuals to either couple “acquisitive” with “role modeling” strategies or “protective” with “personal crafting” strategies<sup>viii</sup>. The first of these umbrella strategies presented in our theory model, predominantly adopted by the men, harnessed a tried and tested organizationally legitimate method to bridge the gap in professional image and identity. It also led to the more rapid adoption

of a new true-to-self professional identity which reduced the amount of time individuals needed to lean on the crutch of an image performance. As this strategy was likely to elicit social validation, it resulted in a relatively swift reduction in perceived image and identity threat. For the second umbrella strategy, predominantly adopted by the women, the story is quite different. This strategy was at odds with the organizational model of success for role transitions and used either illegitimate or 'minority' methods to bridge the gap in professional image and identity. It was also a strategy that was not necessarily chosen, but rather perceived to be the only available option. This umbrella strategy was accompanied by a slower progress towards a new true-to-self professional identity and professional image which befitted the organization, which acted in a way to exacerbate the perceived identity and image threat.

Tajfel (1981) identifies three strategies available to members of a group whose status is threatened: "passing" as a member of a higher status group, social creativity, and advocacy for social change. In the context of our study, "passing" entails adopting a male demeanor, which none of the women in this study reported doing, including those who were coded as acquisitive (and, which they tended to find unappealing in senior women, see Ely 1994). We also found no evidence of social change strategies, a finding consistent with Tajfel's (1981) argument that the extent to which the group boundaries are permeable is a critical determinant of what strategy low status group members use to increase the value of their social identity.

An alternative to these two strategies is "social creativity," defined as reinterpreting low status group characteristics (e.g., stereotypic female traits) as positive but distinctive from dominant group characteristics (Tajfel 1981). When responding to personal identity threats, people enhance their self-worth by highlighting positive dimensions of their identities that are unrelated to the threat (Elsbach and Kramer 1996, Steele 1988). Ashforth and Kreiner (1999), for example, found that people doing "dirty work" tended to use social creativity strategies to maintain favorable self-evaluations. A second strategy is to self-categorize so as to highlight alternate comparison groups, acquiring a positive distinctiveness relative to the "outgroup." (Hogg

and Abrams 1988) (Elsbach and Kramer 1996). These tactics function to deflect attention away from threatened dimensions of identity, rather than addressing the threatened dimensions directly.

Evidence of social creativity strategies abounded in our sample. Although the women in the study clearly observed that a “female” style failed to win women adequate recognition, many exhibited pride in characteristics they associated with their gender, notably what they perceived to be women’s greater thoroughness, command of detail, and lack of self-promotion, as compared to the men. This took the form of “overvaluing” the absence of bravado and reliance on “substance rather than form,” as means of gaining credibility with clients. As the quotes below illustrate, many women participants held strong views concerning differences in the interaction styles of men and women.

*“Men’s and women’s styles are different. Men speak more confidently and boldly on an issue, with very little data to back it up. Women want to have a lot of data and to be confident that they can back up what they are saying.” [Female Consultant]*

*“Men are more comfortable putting on a facade, acting comfortable when they are not. This kind of bullshitting helps them to form relationships that go outside the business issues.” [Female Consultant]*

*“I can see a real difference in the personalities of the male and female Managing Directors. Women are more concerned about making sure people are informed, men are more concerned about making sure the deal gets done.” [Female Investment banker]*

We interpret the presence of these strong views held by many of the women in our sample as evidence for a self-esteem protection mechanism activated in response to the exacerbated identity threat. Of particular interest, it seemed that, in line with predictions of social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1985), this

mechanism served not only the aim to protect the self-esteem of individual participants, but also to increase the value of the entire social category “female professionals.” By framing the comparison of women to men in a way that maximized the positive distinctiveness of their own gender, the women managed the threat to their self esteem exacerbated by the image and identity work strategy they had, more or less voluntarily, chosen to pursue as part of their role transition.

### **Impossible Selves**

Men and women alike experienced a gap between their current professional image and identity and that required in the new role, which was accompanied by feelings of anxiety, stemming from the threat to their previously successful professional selves. This created an impetus for the junior professionals to engage in the processes of image work and identity work; however the strategies and tactics employed by men and women in this endeavor were very different, as were their consequences: the strategies most used by women were more likely to exacerbate identity threat while those used most by men tended to attenuate it.

The organizational model of success for managing the required image and identity transition in both firms was one that coupled “acquisitive” with “role modeling” strategies. This model constitutes one of organizational success, not because it “works” but rather because it is institutionally acceptable to both the firm and its clients. It therefore involves a lower image and identity threat, a reduced necessity for protection strategies, and a faster accomplishment of the transition. The problem for women is that this model represents an “impossible self”. Possible selves are future images of one’s self, either desirable or undesirable, which serve as both filters through which people adjust their behaviour within their current environment, and as motivations for the future (Markus and Nurius 1986). For the men in the two firms we studied, the organizational model of success provided outlines of possible selves towards which they could

strive. On the contrary, for many of the women in the study the same organizational model represented an “impossible self” that could neither be attained, nor granted if claimed.

The high degree of uncertainty in the situation and women’s expectations that their clients held gender biases led them to believe that they would not accomplish their goals with the acquisitive strategies of their male peers. Further, for women, the incongruence between a demeanor that confirms a professional role and a female gender role may make the choice of a protective self-presentation style appear less costly than an acquisitive style (Wiley and Eskilson 1982) for two reasons: it reduces the risk of disapproval for “acting like men” and failing, as well as the potential threat to their self-concept as women. Over time, these processes may lead women to become entrenched in a gender-typed professional identity. Repeated success with “protective” strategies (i.e., not incurring disapproval), therefore, may solidify for women the identity implied by in particular the protective demeanor – e.g., “competent but not bold,” “smart but quiet,” thus reinforcing gender stereotypes about interaction styles.

An alternative explanation to our findings that we considered was whether the behavioral variations we observed resulted from the firm’s selection processes rather than gender differences. Specifically, we questioned whether the two firms we studied had simply hired “aggressive men” and “timid women.” We counter that this is unlikely. Many of our women participants were graduates of elite business schools, which select for and reinforce assertiveness. All participants, regardless of gender, were subjected to stringent hiring procedures designed to identify both analytic talent and interpersonal assertiveness. Even more significantly, all the participants had made it at least to the third year (post-MBA) Associate level. Both firms had processes in place to “weed out” non-performers or people who were not “good fits” in the first two or three years, and our senior informants stressed that the technical skills of both groups were comparable. As such, we are confident that the behavior we describe is situationally induced.

## **Future Research and Limitations**

The present research contributes to our understanding of the specific behavioral and cognitive tactics that people use to maintain and affirm professional identities under conditions of identity threat. By demonstrating the notion of identity threat as both a cause and consequence of image work we illuminate the process by which prototypic professional selves come to represent “impossible selves” for women in demographically skewed organizations. In line with previous research, our findings suggest that the presence of exacerbated identity threat motivates the reframing of situations to maximize the positive distinctiveness of held identity characteristics. As note Elsbach and Kramer in their study of responses to Business Week school ratings (Elsbach and Kramer 1996) pg 470, “If people can make adequate sense of a threat and resolve the dissonance surrounding it simply by affirming alternative identity dimensions that already exist and are readily available, then the need to generate detailed causal explanations for the event may be considerably attenuated.”

A potentially fruitful yet under-investigated area for further research suggested by this study pertains to moderators of the relationship between demography and self-presentation behavior. Although we did not have sufficient variability within our research sites to ground a theory of moderating factors with our data, our participant’s reports suggested that socialization practices and task characteristics may play such a role. A firm’ socialization and career development practices, which are the mechanisms by which they inculcate display rules, may be expected to exacerbate or attenuate the dynamics described here. Van Maanen and Schein (1979) distinguish between formal or informal socialization practices, and whether people are subjected to them in cohorts or as individuals. Informal and individual forms of socialization, such as those that characterized our firms, by contrast to those forms that are formalized and collective in nature, are likely to exacerbate the effects of skewed demography in either domain. That is because socialization outcomes depend on who are the socialization agents and what type of relationship they have with the individual to be socialized, subjecting socialization processes to the relational demography effects described above.

Task moderators relate to the nature of the job or role, since these vary in the extent to which self-presentation serves as an important signals or proxy for competence. If gender serves as a proxy for status and competence primarily in the absence of information based on direct experience, then the importance of demeanor as a signal of competence may be attenuated in jobs that are more specialized, involve longer term relationships, or have more “objective” performance indicators. The effects we describe here are likely magnified in roles such as those we studied because professional-client relations involve delivery of an intangible service and brief, episodic encounters. Obviously, research in a broader variety of firms, encompassing a greater range of practices and job types, is needed to clarify the boundaries of the perspective developed here.

Exploration of situational factors that affect what strategies are used most prevalently should also prove fertile. Tajfel (1981) argued that strategy choice is contingent upon the extent to which group members view the intergroup power relationship as stable - unchanging over time - and legitimate - based on principles accepted by both groups. This is consistent with Ely’s (1995) finding that women lawyer’s in skewed demographic contexts were more likely to assume stereotypic gender identities (by either attempting to pass or overvaluing “female” traits), while women in more demographically balanced firms were more likely to resist being pigeon-holed into either category.

The model we have presented so far is static; it does not address the question of what occurs when the dynamics of either domain change significantly. At issue is the question of what are the conditions under which people change their image and negotiate new identities, or, alternatively, become entrenched in those they have negotiated previously (Swann 1987). Just as people can get locked into a particular demeanor, they can also have experiences that free them to experiment with other possibilities. A positive experience with a different interaction style, when it is visible, can provide a window for negotiating not only a new demeanor but also a different professional identity. As illustrated in the quote below, the positive cycle that ensues from

visible success with a client is self-reinforcing because resources and approval garnered in one context serve as currency for approval and resources in the second:

*“You hear that women aren't "bold." What turned my career around was that I got two accounts where the CFO was a woman. They demanded that I be there at the meetings. When they called, I was the one they wanted to talk to. That's critical – having a client who loves you, when you're the one who gets the phone calls. If you've got the client relationships, the internal relations are easy. If you're on good terms with the person at your level, they can feed you with information, you can run ideas by them. Often people run an idea by the client first "I'm thinking of proposing this to my boss, what do you think?" Then you can be bold in the meeting with the MDs.” [investment banker]*

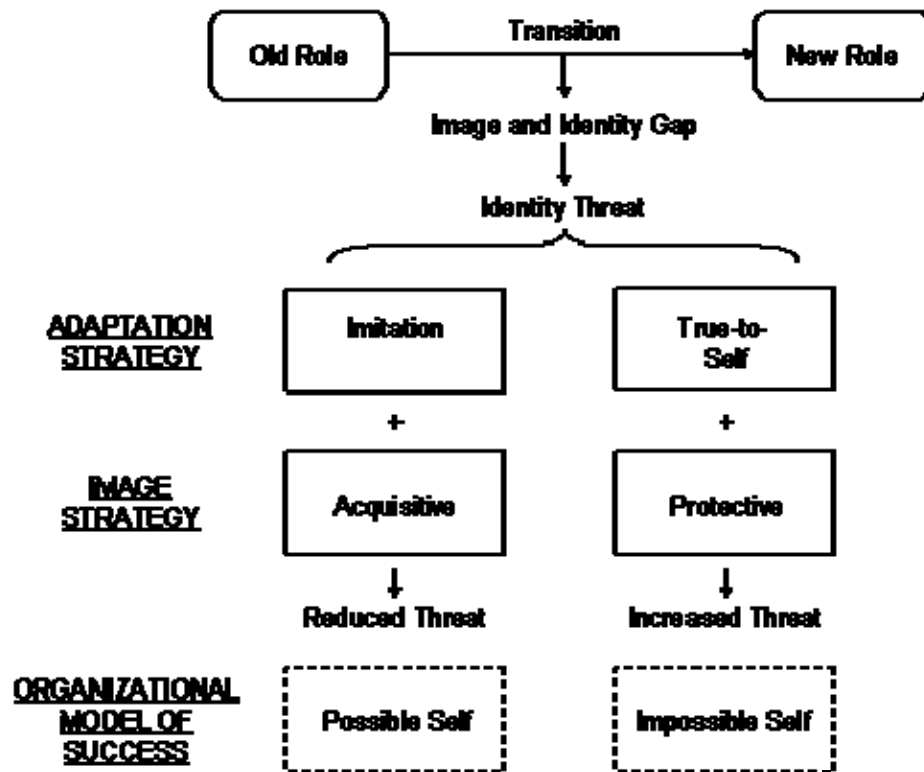
Two themes emerged from our data with regard to women's transitions from a protective to a more acquisitive self-presentation. The first, as suggested by the quote above and others reported earlier, is that women experience the dynamics of interacting with female clients very differently to the dynamics with male clients. Their accounts suggest that the different cues and expectations that are exchanged in same-gender interactions may provide an opportunity for the junior professional to experiment with a more acquisitive self-presentation style. Second, a change of employer domain, independent of its demographic composition, may facilitate a move from protective to acquisitive strategies with clients: two of the women in our sample whom we coded as “acquisitive” in their self-presentation styles were “lateral hires,” brought into their firms after several years with other investment banks. Both reported more protective behavior while with their previous employer. Their accounts are consistent with the argument that identities solidify, locking people into behavior they might prefer to change. A move to a different group or organization, therefore, may free the person of an earlier protective reputation, allowing them to experiment with more acquisitive approaches. Theoretically, it is also possible that a significant change in a mentoring or role-modeling relationship, may lead to similar changes in demeanor. We did not, however, have any data on such a pattern.

The notion that displaying role-appropriate images is an important hurdle for women working in male-dominated occupations is consistent with previous studies. The results of this study support this claim but also suggest some important new directions for theory and research. Our work extends recent thinking on the notion of identity threat as both cause and consequence of image work and sheds additional light on the social processes that motivate distinctiveness or social creativity strategies and, as such, transform organizational models of success into “impossible selves” for professional women.

### **Exhibit One: Interview Protocol**

- I. Overview of study and confidentiality agreement.
- II. Tell me about your job
- III. What does it take to be successful and effective in your current job? How is your performance on the job evaluated?
- IV. What new responsibilities did moving into an [Team Leader/ Account Manager, or Senior Associate/Vice President] role entail?
- V. Tell me a bit about your career to date. What are the key events of your years at the firm?
- VI. Tell me what you see as your strengths and weaknesses.
- VII. What people have played a significant role in your professional development? Who has been most helpful to you in learning the ropes?
- VIII. [For women] Do you think that being a woman has effected your experience as a consultant/investment banker? How?

Figure 1: Theoretical Model



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<sup>i</sup> Women constituted 27.5 of new analysts and associates to the firm overall; of the three major divisions (investment banking, research, and sales and trading), however, investment banking attracted the smallest number of women.

<sup>ii</sup> Analyses of gender differences in adaptation experiences are beyond the scope of this paper and reported in Ibarra and Harrington (1998). Data themes and their implications, however, are noted briefly in the discussion section.

<sup>iii</sup> After participants were selected, three women dropped out of the consulting firm sample; two transitioned to part-time work and one decided to leave the firm. As a result, there were three more men than women in the sample.

<sup>iv</sup> In the subgroup of investment bankers, Associates were 28 to 30 years old, and Vice Presidents between 33 and 36. Among the consultants, team leaders were 27 to 29 years old, and client account managers between 29 and 33. One exception, in the more senior consultant cohort, was a woman who was 37 and had taken time off to have children.

<sup>v</sup> By "client" we refer to the senior member of the client firm who has retained the services of the firm. These were typically CEO's, Chief Financial Officers or general managers of large corporate divisions. Their demographics, therefore, are the same as those for Fortune 500 executives (Himelstein, 1997)

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<sup>vi</sup> Although I did not observe client interactions directly, the junior professional's accounts of their interactions were clients were corroborated by the senior informant's reports of gender differences in client interaction styles, giving a measure of confidence that participants' self-perceptions were an accurate measure of how they appeared to others.

<sup>vii</sup> We did not have sufficient data to code one of the men and two of the women in our sample on their self-presentation style.

<sup>viii</sup> The main variation in this observation was three men who coupled "mixed" or "acquisitive" with "personal crafting" strategies and two women who coupled "mixed" with "personal crafting".

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