

2014

# Law School Personal Statements: an Analysis of Race and Gender Variations in "Impression Management" Among Law School Applicants

Amy L. Miller  
*Cleveland State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/etdarchive>

 Part of the [Psychology Commons](#)

**How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!**

---

## Recommended Citation

Miller, Amy L., "Law School Personal Statements: an Analysis of Race and Gender Variations in "Impression Management" Among Law School Applicants" (2014). *ETD Archive*. 863.

<https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/etdarchive/863>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by EngagedScholarship@CSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in ETD Archive by an authorized administrator of EngagedScholarship@CSU. For more information, please contact [library.es@csuohio.edu](mailto:library.es@csuohio.edu).

LAW SCHOOL PERSONAL STATEMENTS: AN ANALYSIS OF RACE AND  
GENDER VARIATIONS IN “IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT” AMONG LAW  
SCHOOL APPLICANTS

AMY L. MILLER

Bachelor of Arts in History and Political Science

Dickinson College

May 1998

Doctorate of Jurisprudence

Case Western Reserve University School of Law

May 2003

Submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS IN PSYCHOLOGY

at the

CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2014

**We hereby approve this thesis**

**For**

**Amy L. Miller**

**Candidate for the Master of Arts in Psychology**

**for the Department of**

**Psychology**

**And**

**CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY'S  
College of Graduate Studies by**

---

Stephen Slane  
Department of Psychology

---

Victoria Winbush  
Department of Social Work

---

Christopher L. Sagers  
College of Law

---

May 9, 2014  
Date of Defense

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to DMP 16 Cohort, DMP faculty, and my family who encouraged, supported, and nurtured my journey in the program.

I owe you all a debt of gratitude.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would not have come to fruition without the support of many individuals from across the University. First and foremost, much thanks go to Steve Slane for advising me through the entire thesis process from helping me shape my research topic to working on statistical analysis with me. I could not have done this without him. Many thanks to Vikki Winbush and Chris Sagers for agreeing to sit on my thesis committee and offering their guidance and support. Thank you to Rothy Moeller for providing inter-rater reliability to my research. Thanks to Christopher R. Lucak, Assistant Dean for Admission and Financial Aid at Cleveland-Marshall College of Law, for supporting my research. A huge thank you to Steve Antol for the hours of work he dedicated to gathering, sorting, and blind-coding all the data for this research. Finally, thanks to DMP 16 “Divine Nine” who have helped me every step of the way.

LAW SCHOOL PERSONAL STATEMENTS: AN ANALYSIS OF RACE AND  
GENDER VARIATIONS IN “IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT” AMONG LAW  
SCHOOL APPLICANTS

AMY L. MILLER

**ABSTRACT**

This study examined 200 personal statements of male, female, White, and African-American law school applicants to better understand how applicants use impression management to gain admission to law school. Data showed significant differences in how males compared to females and Whites compared to African-Americans use impression management in their law school personal statements. The research found African-Americans discussed personal motivation more often than did White applicants. White females and African-American males more frequently utilized conditions of motivation, gender or race, and personal story to demonstrate their capability to succeed in law school despite generally lower academic indicators. Females had more experience in the law than males. Males discussed red flags and used name dropping significantly more than females. In order to avoid missed opportunities for minority law school applicants to “sell themselves” to admission officers, law school admission offices, pre-law advisors, and the legal profession must clearly state what factors beyond the Law School Admission Test and undergraduate grade point average are necessary to be successful in law school.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	v
LIST OF TABLES.....	vii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	5
III. METHODOLOGY.....	22
IV. RESULTS.....	28
V. DISCUSSION.....	31
REFERENCES.....	46
APPENDICES.....	49

## LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. National Admit Rates from 2002-2013.....	21
2. Inter-rater Reliability Correlation.....	27
3. Means by Race and Gender.....	30



CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

Law school personal statements are one component in the law school application process. I proposed to study race and gender related variations in applicants' use of their personal statements to manage the impressions they make on law school admissions officers. My own experience as a law school admissions professional suggests that topics and personal information in personal statements vary by gender and race. I proposed to specifically study variation between the rhetoric used by male, female, White, and African-American applicants to highlight why they should be admitted. The purpose of the comparison was to understand how each group was engaged in impression management in their personal statement.

**Law School Personal Statements in the Law School Application**

A typical law school application packet includes at least four parts: applicant's undergraduate grade point average (UGPA), score on the Law School Admission Test (LSAT), a personal statement, and one or more letters of recommendation. The most determinative aspects of law school admission are the combination of an applicant's UGPA and LSAT score. However, the numbers rarely tell the whole story; the majority

of applicants are not automatic admits or denials (Lammert-Reeves, 2011). This is when the law school personal statement becomes important.

The personal statement – the one piece of the application materials that comes directly from the applicant to the admission committee – has a significant role to play in determining admission. Bodine (2006) clearly states how valuable the personal statement is to your application:

Law schools are actually doing you a favor by giving your essays so much weight. How so? Because, of all the components of your application, the personal statement is the one over which you have the greatest control...your personal statement is all yours...law schools give you the reins to shape their perceptions of your candidacy. (p. 4).

As such, the personal statement is the sole method an applicant can tell the admission committee whatever the applicant wants them to know to make a decision. Furthermore, the vast majority of law schools do not offer an applicant the ability to have a personal interview as a formal part of the application review process. Therefore, the personal statement is often used as a substitute for personal interviews (Bodine, 2006).

Personal statements are valuable in the admission process because most applicants are not admitted by numbers alone; the LSAT and UGPA are not the sole deciders of admission. In fact, the personal statement becomes most valuable in such circumstances as these: applicants at top schools with uniformly high quality applicants; applicants from underrepresented minority groups; applicants who fall into the middle of the applicant pool (i.e. not presumptive admit or presumptive deny); late applicants vying for the last spots in the class; applicants with unusual life experiences; applicants with opposing

credentials (i.e. a high LSAT, but low UGPA or vice versa), and applicants applying to lower-tier law schools (same problem as top-tier law schools where admission committees are determining the best applicants among an equally low credentialed pool) (Bodine, 2006). The reality of law school admission is that LSAT and UGPA are of paramount importance, but a worthy personal statement can make a difference.

Personal statements are most important to an admission committee when the applicants are of equally high quality, like at the top ranked law schools, or when two applicants have the same numbers. “In fact, the better the school, the more likely it is that the objective data in your application will not determine your fate and that the essays in particular will weigh heavily in the decision” (Montauk, 2011, p. 302). Law school admission officers need to distinguish between applicants. Moreover, personal statements are an excellent method of deciding which students offer unique qualities, drive, diversity, and interest to the new class in spite of multiple candidates who have very similar credentials (Bodine, 2006).

The other equally important reason for personal statements is judging the applicant’s writing ability (Montauk, 2011; Stewart, 2009; Bodine, 2006). After all, lawyers are communicators first and foremost. The ability to communicate through words – on paper and verbally – is a tenet of the profession. Law schools can teach the particular style of writing like a lawyer, but law schools expect a solid foundation in the ability to write. While there is a writing portion on the LSAT, it is a 30 minutes essay, the time aspect of it makes this quick writing sample generally useless except to determine the basics of an applicant’s ability to take a side and argue for their position

(Stewart, 2009). Thus, the personal statement is the only way for admission committees to view the current writing ability of applicants.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

For my literature review, I asked whether any variation can be identified between races and genders in specific impression management tactics in personal statement writing that are believed, on the basis of prior research, to be advantageous in law school admission. To identify such habits, I reviewed existing literatures on (a) law school personal statement writing, resume writing, and job interviews; and (b) impression management.

#### **Literature Review of Writing the Personal Statement**

For the literature review of personal statement writing, a significant amount of the review can be found only in popular, self-help oriented books about law school admission. The reason I used these materials, as opposed to more academic, empirically-based research books, is to address some questions that are important to my research. I wanted to know what admission officers generally consider important, and as there is no better authority at present, I had to use materials outside rigorous academic review. The issues around this portion of the research have not been studied by empirical academic research.

Most law schools give wide latitude to applicants to generally “tell us a something about you” on personal statements. Even those that ask more specific questions, the purpose of the personal statement is to learn more about the applicant that cannot be found elsewhere in the application. Essentially, “the schools are looking for some insight into your *persona*; they are hoping to get a glimpse of the human being behind the data in your file. Your essay should evoke a mental image of your personality” (Stewart, 2009, p. 8). While there may be little direction on what to write about or the methods on how to tell one’s story in the personal statement, there are tips on what admission officers like and do not like in personal statements.

All the information about how to write the perfect personal statement cannot be put into a few pages. However, there are a number of essay “dos” and “don’ts” that are commonly agreed upon by admission officers (Bodine, 2006; Lammert-Reeves, 2011; Montauk, 2011; Stewart, 2009). As a very broad overview, they include:

Be unique and make it interesting. Admission officers want to learn what interesting perspectives and strengths an applicant brings to the law school (Lammert-Reeves, 2011).

- Make it personal. Great tip: “try giving a draft of your personal statement to someone who doesn’t know you. Have him describe you back to you. If the person has a hard time articulating much, you’ve got work to do” (Montauk, 2011, p. 319).
- Must use the active or first-person voice.
- There is room for creativity in the personal statement, but “don’t make us feel as if you submitted something just to show us how clever you are” (Stewart, 2009, p. 99).

- There should be no grammatical errors of any kind. As the Dean of Admission at UCLA put it, “when an applicant fails to proofread adequately, I wonder what kind of attorney that applicant could make” (Stewart, 2009, p. 107).
- Do not use the wrong law school name.
- Do not use clichés like “I love to argue” or “everyone says I’d be a great lawyer” or “I’ve always dreamed of being a lawyer” (Bodine, 2006, p. 36).
- Do not use the personal statement to discuss deficiencies in your application.
- Be willing to share personal information, but avoid confessional or too much graphic details about personal lives, relationships, traumas, or experiences.

The best tip for the personal statement is to focus on one or two themes instead of a broad sweep of everything. Depth is more important than breadth (Stewart, 2009; Lambert-Reeves, 2011; Montauk, 2011). The Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid at Cornell tells applicants, “they should approach the personal statement like an *interview* in which there is a limited amount of time and opportunity to convey something about oneself. Accordingly, applicants should try to think of one or two points or *themes* that they want to convey to an interviewer” (Stewart, 2009, p. 96).

Along with focusing the personal statement, the style of writing should be interesting and story-telling. Admission officers read thousands of personal statements and give each application 15-20 minutes of review (Montauk, 2011). An abstract list of one’s attributes is rather boring to read. After all, “stories stick in people’s memories...you’re trying to make sure the admissions officers remember you” (Lammert-Reeves, 2011, p. 69). The goal is to tell admission officers who you are through experiences and events in your life, not just tell them you are hard-working,

determined, honest, intelligent, or any other attribute. So instead of saying you are dedicated, use a personal experience to show you are a dedicated person (Lammert-Reeves, 2011). Overall, the personal statement should be what it is called – personal, story-telling, and discussing aspects of the applicant’s life not readily available elsewhere in the application.

A well-written personal statement is mandatory. As a Duke admission professional put it, “the personal statement is assumed to be the best work an applicant is capable of. Lots of mistakes in it indicate inattention to detail, which will be a major problem for a lawyer” (Montauk, 2011, p. 318). Since this is the one part of the application where an applicant demonstrates his or her writing skills, silly and preventable grammatical errors are unacceptable. The personal statement should be edited well and often. The applicant must have others proofread the personal statement to be assured it is their best writing (Stewart, 2009). These types of errors can most definitely make a difference in admission to law school.

The purpose of the personal statement is to help admission officers learn more about the applicant. It is not to describe deficiencies or blemishes in one’s application. This could include poor grades, inconsistent grades throughout college, low LSAT scores, re-applying after being denied, gaps in education, or a lot of withdrawals from courses. Most law schools are welcome to explanations, but expect the applicant to attach an addendum to the application file to explain these deficiencies; the personal statement is the wrong venue (Stewart, 2009). As Lammert-Reeves (2011) describes, “the personal statement is not the place to call attention to your flaws. Don’t forget that you’re selling yourself, and the personal statement is your most prominent sales tool”



(p.73). If an applicant chooses to discuss deficiencies in the personal statement, it must be related to a greater theme of the personal statement, otherwise that discussion is misplaced in the personal statement.

The most common mistake in a personal statement is the “reiterated resume” approach “that begins at birth and simply recites every major (and sometimes minor) event of the person’s life. Most of this information is repetitive since it’s included on other parts of the application (Lammert-Reeves, 2011, p. 72). The mistake is that the personal statement is separate piece of the application, so nothing in the personal statement should include information that is found elsewhere in the application file. More specifically, it is a waste of the personal statement space constraints to reiterate information that an admission officer can find in other admission documents. The applicant should use the personal statement “to highlight a few things that will really give us some insight into you as a person” (Stewart, 2009, p. 101). The purpose of the personal statement is to learn more about the applicant with the ultimate goal of determining whether the applicant should be admitted to law school.

### **Literature Review of Impression Management**

Impression management, or self-presentation, has been in existence for as long as humans have roamed the Earth; it influences every social interaction between two or more people. The concept of impression management in everyday life was introduced from the sociological perspective by Erving Goffman in 1959. Goffman used the analogy of a theatrical performance to illustrate how everyday men and women perform at work and maintain their self-presentation; each of us is the actor managing our self-presentation and the other is the audience establishing their impression of us (Goffman,

1959). Goffman (1959) uses the analogy, “a ‘performance’ may be defined as all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants” (p. 15). This is the perfect definition of what every law school applicant is doing – unintentionally and likely unconsciously – when they create their self-presentation to admission officers through the personal statement.

Impression management is any behavior by an individual with the purpose of controlling the impression formed of that individual by others (Tedeschi & Riess, 1981). This is, by nature, a dyadic relationship where one party is trying to create an impression on another (Bolino, Kacmar, Turnley, & Gilstrap, 2008). Leary and Kowalski (1990) found,

Impression management (also called self-presentation) refers to the process by which individuals attempt to control the impressions others form of them.

Because the impressions people make on others have implications for how others perceive, evaluate, and treat them...people sometimes behave in ways that will create certain impressions in others’ eyes (p. 34)

While impression management can be about establishing or confirming self-impressions (Bromley, 1993), the relevant issue is that actors are concerned about how others view them. Impression management is the *action*, i.e. behavior, the individual takes to avoid or lessen negative impressions and/or enhance positive impressions (Tedeschi & Riess, 1981).

In this research, law school applicants, through tactics used in their personal statements, are attempting to influence the manner in which law school admission offices

view their law school application. The dyadic relationship is between the law school applicant and relevant law school admission office.

### **Motivation to Use Impression Management**

Most days each of us scans the world around us to maintain our public persona without purposefully creating an impression on others, until we are motivated to do so (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). The source of this motivation is the same as other psychological behaviors; on average, one's goal is to maximize expected rewards and minimize expected punishments (Schlenker, 1980). Specifically, people become motivated to control how others see them (Leary & Kowalski, 1990) when they are highly motivated to achieve something, like law school admission.

Leary and Kowalski (1990) found there are two distinct processes of impression management: impression motivation and impression construction (p. 35). The components of impression motivation include: goal relevance of impressions, value of desired goals, and discrepancy between desired and current image (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). The goal of getting into law school is very relevant to one's impression before an admission committee so the desire to improve the impression is quite high. If admission to a particular law school is important, the applicant is more motivated to manage their impression (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Moreover, when an applicant desires admission to law school but does not have the requisite LSAT or UGPA; the use of impression management is higher where the discrepancy between desired and current image is greater.

There are many reasons why individuals want to make a good impression on others (Bromley, 1993). This could be for job offers or interviews, gaining membership

in certain social circles, in relationships, and everyday social interactions with others. Much of the use of impression management is healthy and necessary to lubricate social interactions and help individuals adjust in these relations (Bromley, 1993). Researchers have discovered a number of underlying reasons why individuals engage in impression management. Tedeschi and Riess, (1981) investigated a few such reasons: “(a) social role playing in symbolic interactions; (b) avoiding blame and gaining credit; (c) self-esteem maintenance; (d) strategic self-presentation; I power and social influence; and (f) creating connotative impressions” (p. 4). The most applicable to law school applicants is the gaining credit and strategic self-presentation. People are motivated to manage their impression when something they desire is incumbent on that impression (Leary & Kowalski, 1990).

### **Tactics of Impression Management**

There are generally two main types of impression management: defensive and promotional (Bromley, 1993). Both forms are clearly evident in law school personal statements. The first, defensive, is a response to threats of social standing, reputation, or personal identity (Bromley, 1993). Tedeschi and Riess’s (1981) research focused on verbal manners to deal with threats: making excuses, denying, or apologizing, among others. These same tactics, in the written form of personal statements, may look like excuses, explanations of outside circumstances, and not taking ownership of one’s responsibility in the situation.

The most useful of tactics for law school applicants is promotional impression management. As Bromley (1993) explains, “we go out of our way to advertise our aspirations and achievements, or the benefits we can provide for others because of our

abilities and circumstances” (p. 109). This is the purest form of what a personal statement is to achieve; it is a selling tool for the applicant. Moreover, the tactics of promotional impression management are seen in all facets of the application file, including the personal statement. Bromley (1993) cited research of useful tactics in reputation management, such as:

- Marshaling support for oneself (both seen in personal statements and letters of recommendations).
- Finding opportunities for public expression (such as requesting an interview or visiting the law school to make a personal appearance to the admission officers).
- Repairing damage to reputation (explaining unsavory or “red flag” issues in the application in the personal statement or through an addendum to the application) (p. 110).

Clearly, law school applicants actively manage their impressions in the same manner as one maintains their own reputation at work.

The methods of how the applicant manages their impression are still constrained by how they see themselves (Schlenker, 1980). Lying has been internalized as wrong in most people so most managed impressions do not include outright fabrication (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). People, including law school applicants, also look to project an impression of their desired image; this is who they would like to be or really believe they can be (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). On the opposing side, people also manage their impressions to avoid attributes they do not want to be associated (Leary & Kowalski,

1990). “Public impressions reflect an interplay between the self-concept and desired-undesired identity images” (Leary & Kowalski, 1990, p. 41).

There are consequences to unsuccessful impression management beyond the basics of failing to create a positive impression. In fact, bad impression management can create the opposite effect (Bromley, 1993); unconvincing friendliness can be seen as ingratiation or ineffective charm can be seen as smarmy. Because impression management is dyadic, there is a chance for failure when the actor misunderstands the audience to be influenced or has ineffective communication methods to convey the correct impression (Bromley, 1993).

### **Primacy and dilution effect**

Impressions of others, and the way in which each of us manage that impression, begins the first time we learn information about the other. Numerous studies have been replicated demonstrating that we make judgments about others based on the order in which we receive information. Aronson (2012) says the information “we learn about people first have a decisive impact on our judgment of that person” (p. 128). Specifically, if we learn, see, or read about positive attributes of another, our impression of that person is positive whereas if the negative begins the narrative, our impression is negative (Aronson, 2012). Since we rarely have control on how information is presented to us, we must actively correct for it.

The primacy effect problem arises in law school applications in two ways, even with the best intentioned reviewers. If information on the application or undergraduate transcript – two portions of the application file reviewed before the personal statement – is negative, like academic probation, weak grades in easy classes, or criminal history the

applicant's personal statement may not counter the negative first impression. Another issue arises when the applicant begins the personal statement on a negative note, like using clichés, poor grammar, or strongly critical language. This first negative impression may last in the reviewer's mind through the end of the personal statement. That is why many consider admission work to be more art than science.

Another major issue is that too much irrelevant and useless information definitely impacts the impression admission officers have of law school applicants. This dilution effect, where neutral or irrelevant information weakens a decision or impression, can have direct practical value in some circumstances where an individual needs to manage their impression (Aronson, 2012). Aronson (2012) cites a study in which participants were asked which student had the higher grade point average:

- Tim spends about 31 hours studying outside of class in an average week.
- Tim spends about 31 hours studying outside of class in an average week. Tom has one brother and two sisters. He visits his grandparents about once every 3 months. He once went on a blind date and shoots pool about once every 12 months.

The study found that participants believed that Tim of the first bullet point was smarter (p. 131). The irrelevant information diluted the fact that both Tims studied the same amount of time each week. This dilution effect may be positive for a salesperson giving irrelevant information to customers to make him seem more likeable, and thus, less like a pushy salesperson. However, this dilution effect can ruin a personal statement when the irrelevant details that are not salient to the impression law applicants intend.

## **Relation to Job Interview, Resume, and Letter of Application Impression**

### **Management**

While not exactly equivalent to personal statements, the research on impression management during job interviews is compelling. It also offers interesting ways to look at the methods employed by job seeker as somewhat equivalent to law school applicants. Lavashina and Campion (2007) created a tool to measure interview faking behaviors; these behaviors were intended to make the interviewees look like better applicants for the job. The behaviors include: (a) slight image creation, (b) extensive image creation, (c) image protection, and (d) ingratiation. The research found that job applicants who used extensive image creation but did not use image protection had the most favorable outcomes (Levashina & Campion, 2007). Another closely related scale found that individuals provide more disingenuous responses when they want to align their answers to what they believe others expect of them (Paulhus, 1984). While the job interview is spoken, this is closely akin to how law school applicants create personal statements. The goal, ultimately, is to use extensive image creation like claiming prior legal experience when they shadowed a lawyer for two weeks or having the requisite oral skills because they were on the debate team in high school. Based upon Levashina and Campion's (2007) research, those law school applicants who used extensive image protection, including highlighting other attributions because of low LSAT and/or UGPA's may be hurting their chances for law school admission.

Submitting a resume for a job is akin to submitting a personal statement for law school. This is the written form conveying one's capability to perform whether as a law student or in a particular job. Research on resumes and impression management find that



certain tactics work better than others (Knouse, 1994). Knouse (1994) found that “successful impression management tactics in the resume would appear to center upon self-descriptive statements that clarify and enhance credentials in a reasonable manner” (p. 44). When resumes list accomplishments and experience, the readers had improved perceptions of candidates, especially in areas like interpersonal skills and self-confidence (Knouse, 1994). However, one of the most important discoveries of this research that is most tied to law school personal statements is that “impression management does not compensate for weak education or experience credentials” (Knouse, 1994, p. 44). Therefore, no matter how much a law school applicant plays up their legal experience, professional experience, or interpersonal skills, they will still not be granted admission with a low LSAT and UGPA.

Recent research regarding letters of applications for jobs is eerily similar to law school personal statements. Soroko (2012) found that “job candidates adapt their self-presentation to what they perceive is most desirable to the employer. In short, job applicants spend their time and energy writing about what they think the employer wants” (p. 4). This self-presentation of what the employer wants is no different than a personal statement being drafted to appeal to the expected wants of the law school, or at least the belief of what those expected wants are to law schools. Moreover, Soroko (2012) stated that the purpose of an application letter is to pique the interest of the reviewer and “also promote the candidate by highlighting his or her fit to job and company requirements” (p. 5). The personal statement solidifies interest and does play a rather large role in determining whether the law school applicant will meet the challenges of law school.

## **Disparity in LSAT and UGPA Based upon Race and Gender and Resulting**

### **Disparity in Admit Rates**

The Law School Admission Council (LSAC) creates and administers the LSAT to law school applicants. LSAC does extensive research on LSAT and UGPA for all applicants to determine applicants' academic indicators by region, year, gender, ethnicity, race, and country where LSAT is taken. This data is used for longitudinal studies and to help law schools understand how their applicants' fit within the broad perspective of national applicants.

The data clearly shows that African-American law school applicants have significantly lower LSAT scores and UGPA. In 2012, the LSAC did a seven year study of LSAT scores by gender, race, and region (LSAC, 2012). The following data about race, gender, and LSAT score is from this report. Over the testing years of 2005-06 to 2011-2012, the mean LSAT scores of African-American and White applicants did not fluctuate much. The mean LSAT score for Whites was 153 whereas African-American mean LSAT score was 143. The only group that had lower mean LSAT score were Puerto Rican. The national mean LSAT score for all applicants is 150; African-American applicants are scoring well below the national mean.

In relation to gender, males generally score higher on the LSAT than females. Over the seven year period, males mean LSAT score was 152 compared to female score of 149. Specifically, White female test takers' mean LSAT score is 152, African-American females is 142. White male test takers' mean LSAT score is 154 compared to African-American males at 144. Based upon these number, most African-American law

school applicants present the lowest LSAT score, and female applicants have lower scores than their male counterparts.

It has become a major trend in high school and higher education to see the growing gap between male and female performance in school. Overall, males have a lower UGPA than females in both high school and college (Conger & Long, 2010). In college, males typically have lower UGPA in their first semesters of college mainly due to lower GPA and lesser high level classes in high school compared to females. Many male college students start with a low UGPA compared to females and never quite recover. As a result their UGPA is lower than female law school applicants, but their LSAT score is higher.

As a result of this disparity in LSAT and UGPA, admission rates for minority law school applicants is lower. Based on data from the Law School Admission Council, data shows that African-American applicants had a national admit rate of 55% (LSAC, 2013) for the entering class of 2013. White applicants had a national admit rate of 84%. Females nationally were at 75% and Males were at 79%. Historically, the data show varied percentages, but the theme of African-American and Female admission rates being lower maintains. The admit rate percentages since the entering class of 2002 are shown on Table 1. More African-American applicants are being admitted to law school, but their admission rates still trail behind White applicants by a significant margin. Male and Female applicants have closer admit rates, but they are not equal yet.

As the chart indicates, since 2002, there has been no meaningful change in the proportion of law school applicants admitted from each group, but the overall admit rate for all applicants has gone up. Certainly, a small portion of that reflects better pipeline

programs, more effective diversity recruitment, and, arguably, a better understanding of the value of diversity in law school classrooms. However, this increased admit rate also reflects a greatly reduced law school applicant pool. Most law schools are admitting the same number of students to fill their entering classes, but from a smaller pool of applicants. As a consequence, the overall admit rate is higher for all races/ethnicities and for both male and female applicants.

TABLE 1

*National Admit Rates from 2002-2013*

	African-American	White	Female	Male
2002	39	68	61	64
2003	34	63	56	59
2004	35	60	54	58
2005	37	64	57	61
2006	42	69	61	67
2007	43	72	64	69
2008	42	73	64	70
2009	42	74	65	70
2010	44	75	66	71
2011	45	78	69	74
2012	52	82	72	77
2013	55	84	75	79

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of my thesis was to evaluate how applicants managed their impression to admission committees through the personal statement they submitted. In order to better understand the methods employed by law school applicants to manage their impression during the law school admission process, I needed to examine what applicants highlighted about themselves in the personal statements. I needed to appreciate the dimensions of personal statements, like ability, emotion, behavior, identity, and individual characteristics that male compared to female and White compared to African-American applicants highlighted in their personal statement to “market” themselves to law school admission officers. Any gender or racial disparity among applicants’ will assist law schools and the profession in understanding diversity of applicants and how it manifests in personal statements.

#### **Data**

The research included a review of 200 personal statements of both admitted and waitlisted applicants to Cleveland State University, Cleveland-Marshall College of Law (College of Law) for the 2013-14 academic year. Of those 200 personal statements: 150 were White applicants; 50 from African-American applicants; 100 from

males; 100 from females. African-American applicants were chosen because there are no other statistically significant minority groups who applied to the law school; there just is not enough data available.

All of these personal statements are the property of Cleveland State University within the applicants' student records. Each personal statement had personal identifying information removed. On the top of each personal statement, only the number one to 200 (randomly given), is listed at the top of each personal statement. A separate spreadsheet includes the personal statement number with five designations only: male or female, White or African-American, undergraduate grade point average, Law School Admission Test (LSAT) score, and admitted or waitlisted. This spreadsheet will remain in the possession of the College of Law Office of Admission until the researcher has completed the data analysis. The data will remain in the possession of the College of Law Office of Admission for three years for any later research.

### **Procedure**

The personal statements were reviewed for the dimensions of personal statements. Ten dimensions were reviewed for each personal statement. Some of the dimensions were positive, like work experience or a legal background, but others were inappropriate language to be avoided in a personal statement. However, both the recommended and inadvisable topics and styles of personal statements help admission officers make decisions. The researcher reviewed the following dimensions of personal statements:

1. Ability. Evidence of applicant's ability to be an academically quality law student.
2. Emotion. Evidence of applicant's motivation to go to law school or succeed at law school.

3. Experience with law. Evidence of applicant's experience and/or sensation with the legal profession.
4. Experience in law. Evidence of applicant's direct work experience in the legal profession.
5. Race/Gender. Relevance or irrelevance of race and/or gender.
6. Quality of writing overall of the personal statement.
7. Personal Story. Whether the personal statement tells a personal story about the applicant (i.e. not reiterating the resume or academic history).
8. Name Dropping. The extent to which the applicant uses outside people or institutions to enhance their application.
9. Red Flags. Whether the applicant draws attention to aspects in their application that may pose a risk to admission to law school.
10. Concise. Is the personal statement clear, concise, and to the point.

Each personal statement was reviewed for the ten dimensions (Appendix A).

Using a seven point Likert scale, each dimension was accorded a number from one to seven based upon how much or little of the dimension was involved in the personal statement. One would be not at all and seven would be fully engaged in that dimension. For example, if there is no mention of red flags in the applicant's personal statement that would be accorded a one on the Likert scale. The rating scale the researcher used to rate each personal statement of the dimensions is attached (Appendix B).

Once every personal statement was reviewed and each dimension accorded a number, a statistical analysis of the dimensions was completed. Each dimension had an average Likert scale number attached to it for each category of applicant. The researcher



compared these numbers to each racial and gender group, including White and African-American, male and female, White and African-American male, White and African-American female, White male and female, and African-American male and female. The purpose of comparing each of these groups, and smaller sub-groups, was to understand how each group is engaged in impression management in their personal statement.

### **Inter-rater Reliability**

In order to assess inter-rater reliability, the researcher recruited a CSU Senior majoring in psychology to provide scoring for 50 of the personal statements. Together, we discussed the research, the purpose behind it, and what variables of the law school personal statement to be reviewed. We blind-coded and scored five law school personal statements as practice. None of the five personal statements were used in the research for this paper. We discussed why we chose what number we did for each variable in the five personal statements; our purpose was to correlate our responses as close to each other as possible. With the variables that we were in dispute, the two of us discussed how and why we determined the score. In order to assist us in knowing which number was most applicable, the two of us drafted a sheet defining what to look for in each of the variables (Appendix A).

The second reviewer reviewed 50 law school personal statements out of the 200 in the study. The researcher then correlated the ten variables of each personal statement between the researcher and reviewer.

The inter-rater reliability in this study was low to moderate overall (See Table 2). The variable of experience with law, writing quality, personal story, and concise had low correlations. Ability, motivation, and race/gender variable had moderate

correlations. There were a few categories with higher correlation between the researcher and reviewer. Experience in law, name dropping, and red flags variables had high correlation. The positive is that the significant variables in this research – ability, motivation, race/gender, name dropping, red flags, and experience in law – all had moderate to high correlation.

TABLE 2

*Inter-rater Reliabilities*

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Inter-rater Reliability</b>	<b>p value</b>
Ability	0.39	p = .005
Motivation	0.48	p < .001
Experience with law	0.15	p = .30
Experience in law	0.75	p < .001
Race/Gender	0.59	p < .001
Writing Quality	0.26	p = .07
Personal Story	0.24	p = .09
Name Dropping	0.65	p < .001
Red Flags	0.66	p < .001
Concise	0.11	p = .43

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

A multiple analyses of variance was conducted to evaluate whether ten specific conditions were employed as a part of a law school applicant's personal statement differentially as a function of race and gender. The purpose of the study was to determine how the race and gender of a law school applicant determines which conditions are used for impression management in their personal statement. An analyses of multiple variance (ANOVA) on the composite measures of name dropping, experience in law, motivation, red flags, ability, personal story, and race/gender, showed the interaction with race and gender was significant.

Name dropping occurred significantly more frequently ( $F(1, 196) = 4.98, p < .03$ ) for males ( $M = 3.21$ ) than for females ( $M = 2.66$ ). Experience in law occurred significantly more frequently ( $F(1, 196) = 3.95, p < .05$ ) for females ( $M = 1.71$ ) than for males ( $M = 1.35$ ). (See Table 2)

Discussion of motivation, or belief they "can do it", occurred significantly more frequently ( $F(1, 196) = 6.01, p < .02$ ) for African-Americans ( $M = 3.69$ ) than for Whites ( $M = 3.16$ ).

Discussion of red flags occurred significantly more frequently ( $F(1, 196) = 5.08$ ,  $p < .03$ ) for males ( $M = 1.61$ ) than for females ( $M = 1.29$ ). This main effect was qualified by a significant interaction ( $F(1, 196) = 4.35$ ,  $p < .04$ ) where African-American males ( $M = 1.88$ ) were significantly more likely to address red flags in their personal statement than White males ( $M = 1.34$ ).

There were no race or gender main effects. However, African-American males ( $M = 2.18$ ) were significantly ( $F(1, 196) = 3.40$ ,  $p < .07$ ) more likely to mention ability than were African-American females ( $M = 1.76$ ); African-American males had means quite similar to White males ( $M = 2.21$ ) and White females ( $M = 2.24$ ).

There were no race or gender main effects. However, there was a differentially significant interaction where White females ( $M = 3.87$ ) and African-American males ( $M = 3.59$ ) were significantly ( $F(1, 196) = 3.51$ ,  $p < .06$ ) more likely to tell a personal story in their personal statements than African-American females ( $M = 3.42$ ) or White males ( $M = 3.23$ ). Similarly, White females ( $M = 1.99$ ) and African-American males ( $M = 3.41$ ) were significantly ( $F(1, 196) = 3.40$ ,  $p < .07$ ) more likely to discuss their race and/or gender in their personal statement than African-American females ( $M = 2.94$ ) or White males ( $M = 1.55$ ).

Although there was a racial main effect where African-Americans were more likely to discuss motivation in their personal statement, White females ( $M = 3.30$ ) and African-American males ( $M = 3.77$ ) discussed motivation more than their counterparts of African-American females ( $M = 3.30$ ) and White males ( $M = 3.01$ ).

The composite measures of experience in law, writing quality, and concise conditions were not statistically significant across either race or gender variables.

TABLE 3											
<i>Means by Race and Gender</i>											
Dependent Variable	Female	Male	Sig.	African-American	White	Sig.	African-American Male	African-American Female	White Male	White Female	Sig.
Motivation	3.45	3.39	n.s.	3.69	3.16	0.02	3.77	3.61	3.01	3.3	n.s.
Experience with law	1.68	1.47	n.s.	1.57	1.58	n.s.	1.53	1.61	4.41	1.75	n.s.
Experience in law	1.71	1.35	0.05	1.42	1.65	n.s.	1.29	1.55	1.41	1.88	n.s.
Race/Gender	2.46	2.48	n.s.	3.18	1.77	0	3.41	2.94	1.55	1.99	0.06
Writing Quality	4.36	4.39	n.s.	4.39	4.36	n.s.	4.47	4.3	4.3	4.42	n.s.
Personal Story	3.65	3.41	n.s.	3.51	3.55	n.s.	3.59	3.42	3.22	3.87	0.06
Name Dropping	2.66	3.21	0.027	2.82	3.05	n.s.	3	2.64	3.41	2.69	n.s.
Red Flags	1.29	1.61	0.025	1.58	1.33	0.07	1.88	1.27	1.34	1.31	0.04
Concise	4.03	4.32	n.s.	4.18	4.17	n.s.	4.35	4	4.28	4.06	n.s.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to gain some insight into the use of impression management in personal statements by law school applicants. In particular, the research focused on race and gender differences in drafting personal statements and what issues were written about in those personal statements. The results of this research demonstrate that some impression management tactics used by law school applicants in their personal statements may result from race and/or gender differentiation.

#### **Gender Differences in Name-Dropping and Experience in Law**

When evaluating specific gender differences, without race being a factor, the dimensions of name-dropping and experience in law were used more in personal statements by one gender over the other. Males name-drop far more often in their personal statements than females. As a related side note to personal statements, more male applicants provide letters of recommendations from important political figures and well-known lawyers or judges, even if this recommender is only a next door neighbor or father of a school friend, than females.

Females discuss experience in the law more frequently than males because they are statistically more likely to have a non-lawyer position in the legal profession before applying to law school. 85.8% of all paralegals and legal secretaries are women (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). Many female recent college graduates interested in law school, but who want to take some time away from academia before law school, choose to become paralegals and legal secretaries to confirm whether the legal profession is appropriate for them. In addition, many paralegals and legal secretaries see an opportunity to further their career advancement by attending law school, often part-time in the evening, to become lawyers at their firm.

### **Discussing Red Flags Mostly Male; Significantly Higher for African-American Males**

The red flags condition includes any language used by applicants about criminal history, mental illness, substance abuse, low LSAT scores, or poor UGPA. Although admission officers advise addressing red flags in a separate addendum, many applicants choose to discuss them in the personal statement (Stewart, 2009).

Admission offices may deny admission to applicants with low LSAT scores and poor UGPA; this is general practice at all academic institutions. For law schools though, a further complication arises: the American Bar Association (ABA), the organization that accredits all law schools in the United States, considers law schools to be “gatekeepers” to the profession. As such, if an applicant has issues of mental health, criminal history, fraudulent behavior, plagiarism charges, or substance abuse issues – all issues that may preclude an applicant from possessing the requisite character and fitness to be licensed to practice law – a law school may deny admission. The three most likely reasons a law



graduate cannot pass character and fitness is criminal history, substance abuse issues, and mental health concerns (Supreme Court of Ohio, 2014). Therefore, law schools are permitted to deny admission on these grounds. Admission officers are selecting law school applicants for the program of study and for the profession.

For males, and African-American males in particular, the reason for addressing red flags more often in their personal statements is quite simple; males are more likely to have criminal histories and low UGPA in freshman year of college. Therefore, as more male applicants generally have at least one or two arrests to disclose –more often than female applicants – their personal statement tends to mention the offenses in some way (HHS, 2009). The discussion of their criminal infractions may be either to appropriately disclose, as required by the application, or to discuss the impact the criminal infraction on their reason to attend law school.

Moreover, many personal statements from males address their slow academic progress in college; this slow start can be attributed to “pressure from home” to major in an academic discipline the applicant is not suited for or because they were “trying to find themselves”. Only once the applicant found a better major from them or knew what they wanted to study does their transcript begin to reflect that information. Male applicants generally make more of a point to address that upward trend in grades. For many African-American males, specifically, two very clear reasons why they show significantly higher use of red flags in their personal statement is: poor UGPA and criminal history. Many African-American male students do not have a traditional college experience of four years at one institution. Many have begun college only to fail out or get poor grades their first semesters, then quit but often return to finish years later.

However, when an applicant applies to law school, the entirety of their undergraduate academic career is taken into consideration, even if the first semester of college was ten years prior. All undergraduate grades become the applicant's UGPA of record.

Therefore, more often males have to explain lower UGPA than female applicants.

### **Conditions Favored by White Females and African-American Males Equally**

The personal story, race/gender, and motivation were addressed most often by White females and African-American males. Their counterparts, White males and African-American females, did not address these conditions anywhere near as often. For each of these conditions, the member of the race who felt in the lesser position were more likely to draw attention to their race and/or gender, use motivation language like, "I know I can do it" or "I really want this" or even "I'm ready to succeed in law school" to demonstrate their passion and drive, and tell a personal story about why they want to go to law school. Overall, African-American applicants are more likely to use motivating language in their personal statements, however, White females and African-American males used this language far more often than White males or African-American females. White females drew significant attention to their gender in their personal statements; African-American males highlighted their race in their personal statements. Both groups were more likely to include a compelling narrative on why the legal field is where they want to make a difference.

This ostensibly unlikely similarity between White female and African-American male law school applicants, at least in these three conditions, can be explained by the perception each group feels as they apply to law school. Intriguingly, both White females and African-American males compare themselves to White males. Both groups see the

profession as dominated by White males; the face of the legal profession is typically older, White males. Therefore, White females when compared to White males find themselves in the lower position in terms of law school admission. Simply put, White females are not trying to impress admission officers to admit them over African-American females; they are attempting to educate admission officers that they are as excellent a candidate as the White male applying. This same scenario applies for African-American males comparing themselves to White males.

Put in a different way, the perception is that the White male is the “desirable” candidate and other applicants need to prove themselves just as worthy. White females believe they just need to prove that despite being a female, they are just like White males. African-American males employ the same tactic; they are just a different race from the desirable White male. Both of these groups see themselves as being one step removed from the White male (gender or race) but the African-American female has to promote herself in different ways entirely because she is two steps removed from the White male. For White females and African-American males, focusing on motivation, their gender or race, and telling a personal story about why they want to attend law school are impression management tactics to highlight other values they offer the law school other than pure academic indicators.

### **Ability Significant in African-American Males Compared to African-American Females**

One of the most noteworthy results of the research is how significantly more often African-American males discuss, in their personal statement, their ability to succeed in law school compared to African-American females. In fact, African-American males

discuss ability at approximately the same level as Whites. The researcher defined ability to include discussions such as doing well in one or two specific college classes they had related to law school, upward trends in UGPA, or Master's level work, time management skills, research and writing ability, outspoken or well-spoken, and experience public speaking.

As discussed above, much research has been done to demonstrate that African-American law school applicants generally have lower LSATs and UGPA than White applicants (LSAC, 2012). Certainly, if African-American males have significantly lower LSAT scores and UGPA than the average applicant to the particular law school, it makes logical sense they would highlight particular skills and abilities they possess for law school; the hope would be to draw attention to abilities that may not be accurately reflected in the UGPA or LSAT. As a tactical move, this makes plenty of sense.

If, however, African-American males are admissible based upon their UGPA and LSAT, the question is why are they still focused on ability more than other, potentially less, admissible applicants? African-American male applicants in this study were all admitted or waitlisted; as such, their academic credentials were not significantly lower than White applicants or African-American females. In fact, their average LSAT is 150 and UGPA is 2.99. African-American females' average LSAT is 146; their UGPA is 3.20. White males' average LSAT is 154, UGPA is 3.29; White females' average LSAT is 152, UGPA is 3.41. This means they did not need to prove they are admissible; their personal statement could have included more about who they are and how they wanted to use their law degree.

This appears to be the true definition of impression management by African-American males. These men – some very consciously and others without deliberation – chose to discuss the abilities they perceive are needed to succeed in law school to influence admission officers to perceive them as being a great candidate for law school despite lower LSAT and UGPA. Their tactic is to highlight skills, not overall academic skill, to create the impression they can succeed in law school. For example, when an African-American male's overall UGPA is lower, but they got a Master's degree, they will spend a significant portion of their personal statement discussing how that translates to their ability to succeed in law school. Another applicant may focus on their experience as fraternity president networking with alumni, giving presentations to members, and working well with others. Still another may focus on two or three grades in specific classes, like constitutional law, political science class, or particularly difficult humanities class, to prove ability to succeed academically despite overall weaker academic indicators.

#### **African-American Females Did Not Use Particular Impression Management Tactics**

While the data is surprising in its results, African-American females, as a single group, do not use impression management tactics that particularize them from another group. The group was not different as a function of being African-American female. African-American females either fell within the gender or race distinction for each dependent variable; none of the variables showed a particular increased or decreased mean because of the African-American female group. Whereas, African-American males, as a single group, were distinct from the other three groups. While it may appear as though African-American females are not relevant to this research, but, rather, they

were not statistically significant as a group when evaluating these variables of law school personal statements.

### **Implications for Law School Admission Offices and Pre-Law Advisors**

There are a number of valuable implications of this research for law school admission offices and pre-law advisors. The three big implications are:

- (1) the only way to overcome low academic indicators is to promote yourself through impression management;
- (2) minority applicants do not believe law school admission offices see them at the individual level, but always at the group level; and
- (3) law school admission officers are not clearly stating, nor in any way in agreement about, what skills, attributes, and past experiences are valuable enough to overcome low academic indicators.

These implications do not exist in a vacuum; they are joined and work off each other in profound ways. Minority applicants often have to use impression management tactics, but do not clearly understand which topics to address to create the appropriate impression. Law school admission officers are often saying one thing (“we review applications beyond just grades and test scores”) but refuse to tell students exactly what they are reviewing beyond LSAT and UGPA. As a consequence, many minority applicants are using impression management ineffectively, but they do not realize it. This is attributable to the fear minority applicants have that law schools see them at the group level – as women, they have lower LSAT scores but higher UGPA, as African-American, they always have terrible LSAT scores and mediocre UGPA – but rarely see them as individuals who happen to be female or African-American. These stereotypes

are ingrained the law school mythology; applicants are merely trying to highlight what makes them individuals and not like the rest of the group.

This research clearly demonstrates that all law school applicants are using some form of impression management in their personal statements; however, African-American males and White females use certain tactics of impression management far more than other applicants. The issue is that many women and African-American applicants may be, unknowingly, sabotaging their chance to “sell themselves” to admission officers and the law school itself by focusing on motivation, race or gender, abilities, and red flags. Unfortunately, applicants may be missing the opportunity to discuss real attributes that admission officers would rather know about the applicant: like experience around or with attorneys, exposure to difficult reading, writing, and research courses, proof of critical thinking or thinking beyond regurgitation, or specific skills that will directly assist a student in performing well in law school.

While impression management is necessary, particularly when an applicant’s LSAT and UGPA are lower, an applicant must use impression management in a way to benefit their application. The use of impression management, mostly by non-White male applicants, is clearly a mechanism to prove their value to the law school at an individual level. It is as if the applicants are saying to themselves, “I am underrepresented at the law school, I do not have the numbers, and the law school cannot see me and my accomplishments.” White females and African-American males, in particular, are trying very hard to prove their value to law schools at an individual level.

As a profession, admission officers often highlight that law schools review applications “holistically”. The profession does state that LSAT and UGPA matter, but

are very elusive about what matters beyond LSAT and UGPA. Data shows that law schools do not select applicants solely on academic indicators, but what are the other factors beyond academic indicators that matter? I believe as a profession, admission officers are hampering minority applicants by being too vague about what matters beyond academic indicators. This is exacerbated by inaccurate and stereotyped advice from pre-law advisors about how to write a personal statement. Admission officers do not agree and appear unwilling to come together to assist applicants in clarifying how to use the personal statement to their best advantage. While each law school has different values and missions, the reality is that some agreement between law schools and the profession must exist to advise all applicants, but to advise minority applicants fairly.

Ultimately, no one, not law schools, law faculty, practicing attorneys and alumni, American Bar Association, etc., is painting a picture of what is necessary to succeed in law school beyond academic indicators – the easy piece of the puzzle. Neither law schools, their faculty, nor the legal profession, are willing to clearly outline, and make public, the skills, abilities, experiences, and attributes needed to be a successful law student. In fact, there is a conflict in admission offices around the differences in what is needed to be a success law student compared to a successful lawyer. For example, knowing lawyers or prominent members of society, being president of a fraternity, or doing a two-year mission trip may help you be a successful lawyer, but those are not the skills needed to be a successful law student. Prospective law students need to know what the abilities are in order to develop those skills and find experiences to enhance their application. This is truly an educational gap where everyone is a loser; as a result,



African-American and female applicants face a tougher hurdle in making the right impression on their personal statement.

### **Inter-rater Reliability**

The inter-rater reliability in this study was low to moderate overall (See Table 2). The variable of experience with law, writing quality, personal story, and concise had low correlation. Ability, motivation, and race/gender variable had moderate correlation. There were a few categories with higher correlation between the researcher and reviewer. Experience in law, name dropping, and red flags variables had high correlation. The positive is that the significant variables in this research – ability, motivation, race/gender, name dropping, red flags, and experience in law – all had moderate to high correlation.

In a larger context, this low to moderate correlation between the researcher and reviewer proves there is little consistency in defining these variables. Yet, these are variables that all admission officers read in personal statements and many pre-law advisors advise students to include in their law school personal statements. Moreover, law applicants use many of these conditions when determining how and what to write for their personal statements. For example, what does “ability” mean in the context of law school admission? If only the LSAT and UGPA count as ability, what is the purpose of the personal statement? Can a high school and college football player’s “drive to win” and the disadvantaged applicant who is “motivated and believes in herself” both be motivation? Is experience in the law count if it is paralegal work, one-week internship at a judge’s chamber, or working on a political campaign or within a senator’s office in Washington, DC? This lack of clarity around these definitions – often perpetrated by the

admission offices, the law school, the American Bar Association, and the legal profession overall – pose a huge challenge for minority applicants.

The ultimate lesson of this research is that these variables are difficult to judge. Determining a Lickert scale assignment to many, if not all, of these variables is a matter of personal decision at the time of reading. Even with a thorough discussion between the researcher and reviewer before reviewing the law school personal statements, the researcher and reviewer, when reading the law school personal statements, would be carrying both the outlined definitions of these conditions and their own. Their own definitions may have been used instead of the outlined categories. As translated to law school admission, even if an admission office has clear guidelines on what each admission officer must or should look for in the personal statement, when actually reading the personal statement the officer will be interpreting the entirety of the personal statement by their past experiences, opinions, and perspectives around what a law school applicant should be. That is why I recommend further research on how admission officers may be biased against law school applicants by race and gender. Therefore, this data should be used with care when making meaningful attributions about it.

### **Limitations of the Research**

While this research can illuminate issues around how applicants by race and gender view law school, and thus manage their impression to gain admission, but the data is limited in scope. This study only included 200 students applying to one law school in the United States. Specifically, this data only came from Cleveland-Marshall College of Law applicants. If I had a larger sample size from multiple law schools, I could control

for the law school to which the applicant applied. There is a strong chance there may be less gender and racial variations on certain variables likely correlated with the academic quality of the applicants. Furthermore, the data included only fifty African-American applicants. A thorough research of more law school applicants, including different races and ethnicities, may help parse out why certain applicants use the impression management tactics they do.

Another limitation of the research is the participants. Each of the groups included only law school applicants who were admissible to law school. The applicants in the pool were all of higher academic quality. It is likely that if the research included all law school applicants for the 2013-14 academic year, instead of just those admitted or waitlisted, the results of the research would be significantly different. The results for some groups may have been even further apart in their means than they are now or a statistically significant distinction between race, gender, or an intersection of the two may have presented itself.

Even though every attempt was made to read each personal statement without bias, it is unavoidable when a human researcher is reading the personal statements and making a judgment. It is important to note that the researcher has previously read thousands of law school personal statements for her previous work in law school admissions. It could be argued that the researcher is too experienced with personal statements – too much an “insider” – and unable to be as objective as another researcher without her history.

### **Further Research**

There appear to be further study possibilities in two other related areas. With a larger pool of applicants, it would be beneficial to include other races, certainly, to see how impression management may be similar or different depending on race. Moreover, this research could be expanded to include other diversity components including ethnicity, religion, disability, sexual orientation or sexuality, socioeconomics, and other factors of diversity in applicants to law school. This would help pre-law advisors and law school admission offices understand why certain groups of applicants write personal statements the way they do; this information may help reduce the bias against certain groups of diverse applicants.

Another area of research should be from the other side of the application process; further research should be done on the impression admission officers make of applicants based upon gender, race, UGPA, low LSATs, criminal history, socioeconomic, hometown, family, religion, or any other factor that may arise in the personal statement. Clearly, social psychology finds that people prejudge others and situations all the time; it is human nature to stereotype people (Aronson, 2012). The next stage of the research is to develop a survey or research study to evaluate how admission officers may prejudge, or confirm their judgment of, applicants based upon the personal statement. In real terms, do admission officers, even with the best intentions, prejudge an applicant with the name LaTonya or Malik? Does the hometown of East Cleveland create a bias in both White and African-American admission offices? More importantly, are admission officers such a small minority of Americans – the ones, no matter what race, gender, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, etc., privileged enough to get a J.D. – that they are too biased against applicants even if those applicants look, sound, feel just like they

did five, ten, or twenty years ago applying to law school? Answering some of these questions, as difficult as the responses might be, would be incredibly valuable for pre-law advisors to properly prepare minority applicants for the law school admission realities. This would also raise awareness in the law school admission profession about the value of educating new admission officers around their biases and the dangers those biases pose for all applicants.

## REFERENCES

- Aronson, E. (2012). *The social animal* (11th ed.). New York, NY: Worth Publishers.
- Bodine, P. (2006). *Great personal statements for law school*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Bolino, M. C., Kacmar, K. M., Turnley, W. H. & Gilstrap, J. B. (2008). A multi-level review of impression management motives and behaviors. *Journal of Management*, 34(6), 1080-1109.
- Bromley, D. B. (1993). *Reputation, Image and Impression Management*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, *Women in the Labor Force: A Databook*, Paralegals and Legal Assistants, on the Internet at <http://www.bls.gov/cps/wlf-databook-2011.pdf> (visited March 31, 2014).
- Conger, D. and Long, M. C. (2010). Why are men falling behind? Gender gaps in college performance and persistence. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 627(1), 184-214.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *Presentation of self in everyday life*. Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press. Health and Human Services Research Brief (2009). Vulnerable Youth and the Transition to Adulthood, retrieved on March 31, 2014 at <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/09/VulnerableYouth/6/index.shtml>
- Knouse, S. B. (1994). Impressions of the resume: The effects of applicant education, experience, and impression management. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 9(1), 33-45.
- Lammert-Reeves, R. (2011). *Get into law school: A strategic approach* (5th ed.). New

York, NY: Kaplan Publishing.

Law School Admission Council (2012). *LSAT performance with regional, gender, and racial/ethnic breakdowns: 2005-2006 through 2011-2012 testing years* (LSAC Technical Report 12-03). Newtown, PA: Law School Admission Council.  
Retrieved from <http://www.lsac.org/docs/default-source/research-%28lsac-resources%29/tr-12-03.pdf>

Law School Admission Council (2013). *US national decision profiles*. Newtown, PA: Law School Admission Council. Retrieved from  
<http://www.lsac.org/members/data/national-decision-profiles>

Leary, M. R. & Kowalski, R. M. (1990). Impression management: A literature review and two-component model. *Psychological Bulletin*, *107*(1), 34-47.

Levashina, J., & Campion, M. A. 2007. Measuring faking in the employment interview: Development and validation of an interview faking behavior scale. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *92*: 1638-1656.

Montauk, R. (2011). *How to get into the top law schools* (5th ed.). New York, NY: Prentice Hall Press.

Paulhus, D. L. 1984. Two-component models of socially desirable responding. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *46*: 598-609.

Schlenker, B. R. (1980). *Impression management: The self-concept, social identity, and interpersonal relations*. Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Soroko, E. (2012). The presentation of self in letters of application: A mixed-method approach. *Journal of Employment Counseling*, *49*, 4-17.

Stewart, M. A. (2009). *How to write the perfect personal statement* (4th ed.).

Lawrenceville, NJ: Peterson's.

The Supreme Court of Ohio, Office of Bar Admission. Summary of Character and Fitness Process in Ohio, retrieved from The Supreme Court of Ohio website on March 31, 2014.

<http://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/Boards/characterFit/CFProcess.pdf>

Tedeschi, J. T. & Riess, M. (1981). Identities, the phenomenal self, and laboratory research. In J. T. Tedeschi (ed.), *Impression management theory and social psychological research* (pp. 3-22). New York, NY: Academic Press, Inc.



## APPENDIX A

### CONDITION DESCRIPTIONS

**Ability:** major in college, upward trend in grades, time management, research & writing ability, outspoken, public speaking, master's degree

**Motivation:** drive to succeed, faith in self, commitment (self not outside influences)

**Experience with law:** experience with law (like divorce, foreclosure, foster care, etc.)

**Experience in law:** worked in the law (like job, internship, paralegal, legal assistant, etc.)

**Race/Gender:** ease in which could tell race and/or gender

**Quality of writing:** grammar, structure, proofreading, spelling

**Personal story:** theme, clear on why want to go to law school, connection between story and why law school

**Name-dropping:** using any name or organization to influence/leverage to get into law school (could include important lawyers, groups, where live, status), something exterior to self to enhance application

**Red Flags:** LSAT, grades, mental illness, theft/criminal activity, substance abuse

**Concise:** straightforward, length, to the point, direct, clear (i.e. not rambling)

APPENDIX B

No. \_\_\_\_\_

1 = no evidence of dimension in personal statement  
 2 = very brief evidence of dimension in personal statement  
 3 = significant evidence of dimension in personal statement  
 4 = at least half of personal statement evidences dimension  
 5 = majority of personal statement evidences dimension  
 6 = vast majority of personal statement evidences dimension  
 7 = all or most of personal statement evidences dimension

Ability	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Motivation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Experience with Law	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Experience in Law	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Race/Gender	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Writing Quality	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Personal Story	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Name Dropping	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Red Flags	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Concise	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Researcher's Prediction

Male or Female

White or African-American