Impression Management, Psychology of

Impression management (also called self-presentation) refers to the processes by which individuals attempt to control how they are perceived by other people. By conveying particular impressions of their abilities, attitudes, motives, status, emotional reactions, and other personal characteristics, people can influence others to respond to them in desired ways. Impression management is a common means by which people influence one another and obtain various goals (Jones and Pittman 1982).

The concept of impression management was popularized by Erving Goffman (1959), a sociologist and ethnologist, who viewed impression management not only as a means of influencing how one is treated by other people but also as an essential aspect of social interaction. According to Goffman (1959), social encounters are mediated by the impressions that people form of one another. As a result, smooth and effective interpersonal interaction requires that each interactant projects a public identity to guide others’ behaviors. The study of impression management was introduced into social psychology by Edward Jones (1964), whose early research on ingratiation focused on the ways in which people influence others by making themselves appear likeable and socially attractive. During the 1960s and 1970s, research on impression management developed along two distinct paths. One line of research focused on the situational and dispositional factors that affect the kinds of impressions people try to convey of themselves, and the other line applied self-presentational perspectives to the study of other psychological phenomena, such as attitude change, conformity, leadership, psychological disorder, and health risks.

1. The Nature of Impression Management

People use many different behaviors in the service of impression management. Any behavior that conveys information about an individual may be used as a self-presentational tactic (Leary 1995, Schlenker 1980). This is not to say that all behavior is necessarily self-presentational—only that virtually any behavior may be used for self-presentational purposes. Most empirical research has focused on people’s descriptions of their attributes and attitudes to foster impressions in others’ minds. However, people also impression-manage nonverbally. For example, people can regulate how others perceive them through their facial expressions, gestures, ways of standing and sitting, and choices of seating location (around a table or in a classroom, for example). They also use props—physical objects such as clothing, furnishings, automobiles, and other personal possessions—to promote certain images of themselves. Behaviors as mundane as eating, grooming, and driving also have a self-presentational component. Furthermore, many instances of helpfulness, as well as aggression, may reflect people’s efforts to be viewed as helpful versus threatening, respectively.

Self-presentation has sometimes been viewed as a deceitful and manipulative means of influencing other people, and sometimes it is. However, impression management is not necessarily deceptive. People often engage in strategic impression management to assure that other people perceive them accurately. Because personal characteristics and inner states are not always obvious to other people, people must often take steps to insure that others perceive them accurately. Furthermore, although people sometimes present images of themselves that they know are untrue, more often they veridically present those aspects of themselves that they believe will help to achieve their interpersonal goals in a particular situation. Although self-presentation is tactical, it is not necessarily deceptive.

Most self-presentation involves efforts to convey a socially desirable impression in order to be regarded positively. Generally, people are more likely to achieve their goals if they are perceived as likeable, competent, ethical, or otherwise socially desirable than if others regard them negatively, so desirable self-presentations predominate. However, people sometimes wish to convey socially undesirable impressions of themselves. For example, people may want to be seen as hostile because doing so helps them to intimidate others to do as they wish, or as weak or helpless to elicit support from other people. For this reason, it is important to distinguish between desirable self-presentations (i.e., those that are likely to result in favorable evaluations) and desired self-presentations (i.e., those that the individual believes will accomplish his or her goals).

Although little research has examined self-presentational behaviors in children, evidence suggests that children begin to show a concern with other people’s evaluations of them soon after the emergence of self-awareness, typically by age two. By age three, children show evidence of trying to influence other people’s perceptions of them, for example, by denying that wrongdoing was their fault. Children become increasing skilled at controlling others’ impressions of them.

References


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with age, although they do not appear to attain an adult level of self-presentational ability until late adolescence.

2. The Determinants of Impression Management

People have many reasons to monitor and regulate how they are perceived by others. Most important outcomes in social life—including friendships, group memberships, romantic relationships, desirable jobs, status, and influence—partly depend on other people perceiving the individual as being a particular kind of person or possessing certain kinds of attributes. Because most of people’s goals depend on making particular desired impressions and not making undesired impressions, people are pervasively concerned with the impressions that other people form of them. People appear to monitor how they are coming across on an ongoing basis, but the degree to which they are motivated to impression-manage and the nature of the impressions they try to foster vary across situations and among individuals.

2.1 Impression Motivation

Three primary factors affect the degree to which people are motivated to impression-manage in a particular social encounter (Leary and Kowalski 1990). First, people are more highly motivated to control how they are perceived by others when they believe that their public images are relevant to the attainment of desired goals. Conversely, when the impressions that other people form have few implications for one’s outcomes, the motivation to impression-manage will be low. This fact is one reason that people are more likely to impression-manage when interacting with powerful, high status people than with less powerful, low status individuals.

Second, people are more highly motivated to impression-manage the more valuable the goals for which their public impressions are relevant. When achieving important, highly desirable goals depend on the kinds of impressions others form of them, people are more motivated to monitor and control how they are perceived than when the goals are less valuable.

Third, people are more highly motivated to impression-manage when a discrepancy exists between how they want to be perceived and how they believe other people currently perceive them. Thus, public failures and embarrassing events that convey impressions that are discrepant from the images that people wish others to form cause them to engage in self-presentational efforts to repair their damaged image.

2.2 Impression Construction

When people are motivated to manage their impressions, features of the social context and their own personalities determine the specific nature of the impressions that they try to convey. Five sets of factors are particularly important determinants of impression construction (Leary and Kowalski 1990). First, the content of people’s self-presentations is affected by the roles that they occupy and by the norms in the immediate social context. Typically people want to convey impressions that are consistent with their roles and the prevailing norms. Many roles—such as the roles of leader, military officer, and member of the clergy—carry self-presentational requirements regarding the kinds of impressions that people who occupy those roles should and should not convey. Furthermore, social norms may prescribe or proscribe how people in a particular social context should appear.

Second, people tailor their self-presentations to the values of the individuals whose perceptions are of concern. Sometimes people fabricate identities that they think others will value. More commonly, however, they selectively present truthful aspects of themselves that they believe coincide with the values of a particular target and withhold information about themselves that they think others will value negatively. In this way, people can present accurate impressions of themselves that are nonetheless tailored to the preferences and values of other people.

Third, people’s choices of public images are influenced by how they think they are perceived currently. Often, self-presentational behaviors are aimed at dispelling undesired impressions that other people currently hold of the individual. When people believe that others have, or are likely to develop, an undesired impression of them, they often try to refute the undesired impression by showing themselves to be different from what others believe. When refutation of the negative impression is not possible, they may compensate by projecting particularly desired impressions on other, unrelated dimensions.

Fourth, the kinds of impressions people try to create are influenced not only by the social context but also by their own self-concepts. People often want other people to see them as they really are, but must deliberately manage their impressions in order to be viewed accurately. In addition, people’s self-concepts constrain the images they try to convey. Not only do many people believe that it is unethical to present images of themselves that are inconsistent with how they really are, but they usually doubt that they will successfully sustain public images that are inconsistent with their actual characteristics. The risk of self-presentational failure, and the social sanctions that accompany it, deter people from presenting impressions that are vastly discrepant from how they see themselves.

Finally, the images that people try to project are also influenced by their desired and undesired selves—how they wish to be and not to be. People tend to manage their impressions in ways that coincide with their desired selves and that steer away from their undesired selves.
3. **Self-presentation and Behavior**

When people are in the presence of others, few of their behaviors are unaffected by their desire to maintain certain impressions in others’ eyes. Even when people are not expressly trying to create a particular impression, prevailing concerns with their public images constrain their behavioral options. Whatever else people may be doing, they typically do it in ways that don’t create undesired impressions. Concerns with others’ impressions impact virtually all areas of social life.

3.1 **Interpersonal Behavior and Emotion**

In an early effort to offer a self-presentational explanation of interpersonal behavior, Tedeschi et al. (1971) argued that phenomena that had previously been attributed to the need to maintain cognitive consistency actually reflected people’s efforts to maintain an impression of consistency in other people’s eyes. Several studies subsequently supported their suggestion that phenomena that had been attributed previously to cognitive dissonance were affected by self-presentational processes (Schlenker 1980).

Self-presentational perspectives have been applied to the study of a variety of social psychological phenomena, including conformity, aggression, prosocial behavior, leadership, negotiation, social influence, gender, stigmatization, and close relationships (Baumeister 1982, Leary 1995, Schlenker 1980 Tedeschi 1981). In each instance, research has shown that these phenomena are affected, in part, by people’s efforts to make particular impressions on others. In group settings, for example, people in positions of leadership have been shown to tailor their public images to the current demands of the group’s situation. Research also shows that prosocial behavior is affected by self-presentational motives; people are more likely to be helpful when their helpfulness is publically known rather than anonymous, and they behave more prosocially when they desire to repair a damaged social image by appearing helpful. Likewise, many instances of aggression are self-presentational efforts to show that the individual is willing to hurt others to get his or her way. Many differences in the behavior of men and women can be traced to gender-biased norms regarding the kinds of impressions that are appropriate for men versus women. In brief, self-presentational concerns pervade social life.

Self-presentational processes also affect emotional experience. People become socially anxious when they are motivated to make a desired impression on others but doubt that they will do so successfully. Whenever the self-presentational stakes are high, doubts in one’s self-presentational efficacy evoke anxiety. The nervousness that people experience on first dates, in job interviews, and while speaking in public can be traced to self-presentational concerns. Furthermore, when events occur that have undesirable implications for people’s public images—showing them to be less competent, likeable, ethical, or otherwise socially desirable than they desire—people experience embarrassment. The face-saving behaviors that accompany episodes of embarrassment are efforts to undo whatever self-presentational embarrassment has occurred (Leary 1995, Schlenker 1980).

3.2 **Mental and Physical Health**

Impression management processes have also been studied in the context of mental and physical health. The self-presentational use of psychological symptoms has received considerable attention. Braginsky et al. (1969) showed that hospitalized schizophrenics modify the severity of their disordered behavior depending on whether making a disturbed or nondisturbed impression will be most beneficial to them. Research on samples of university students likewise shows that people will exaggerate, if not fabricate, reports of psychological distress when doing so serves their social goals. Similarly, hypochondriasis appears to have self-presentational features: people convey impressions of illness, injury, and infertility when doing so helps to achieve desired outcomes, such as excusing poor performance, eliciting support, or avoiding onerous responsibilities.

Self-presentation is also a risk factor for physical injury and illness. People engage in a number of dangerous behaviors for self-presentation reasons. Risky behaviors as diverse as suntanning, steroid use, excessive dieting, practicing unsafe sex, and fast driving can be traced to efforts to make certain impressions on other people. Furthermore, concerns with one’s impressions may deter people from seeking medical attention when needed because of embarrassment about the presenting condition or about the medical examination itself. People may even refuse to undergo medical treatments if doing so compromises their public images (Leary et al. 1994).

See also: Control Behavior: Psychological Perspectives; Person Perception, Accuracy of; Personality and Conceptions of the Self; Self-conscious Emotions, Psychology of; Self-evaluative Process, Psychology of; Self-monitoring, Psychology of

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Imprisonment: Sociological Aspects

Most people have an opinion about imprisonment: prison is a place for criminals, a room behind solid walls and bars, a nasty place for nasty people. But, as so often, complexities of meaning emerge with reflections and studies. To start with, an examination of the roots of the concept introduces new associations. In Old French, two meanings of the term exist. The first is associated with being apprehended, or held captive. The second meaning has to do with considering a person as being a capture, a prize, a person with a value for other persons.

The first sense, that of being captured, might also have several meanings. It might be understood as being captured in the small room behind walls and bars. But a single parent living on the tenth floor with three sick children at home might also experience a sense of being captive there. People in a caste or rigid class society might also have opinions on what it is to be captured in one’s position in life, as might remote villagers watching life in London on the BBC. And so might the electronically tagged factory worker whose bracelet would trigger an alarm in the police or probation service if he did not go straight home after work. Imprisonment is not only in small rooms. Whole societies, or segments of them, can experience the meaning of being in prison. Attempts to grasp the phenomenon of imprisonment open up renewed perspectives on what freedom is. A prisoner on hunger strike, naked in a punishment cell, was reported as saying that he had never felt so free, because there was nothing more to lose.

Prisons can also contain prizes, valuable to those who keep them. Rich or important people are of value to those who capture them. They can be exchanged for money or political privileges. Whole segments of populations might be valuable to power holders. Slaves are often useful for labor-intensive tasks. They were also useful in the war industry both in the USSR and Germany. Ordinary prisoners can also be seen as precious. Large segments of societies make a living from keeping them captured.

1. The Penal Picture

Moving back to the phenomenon as most people in the Western world experience it, prison is a place for those waiting to receive a sentence, or having received such a sentence. A useful measure of prison populations in a country is the number of prisoners per 100,000 inhabitants. There are many alternative indicators, e.g., the flow through the system, but it is difficult to find reliable comparative data for this flow. The figures presented here include both people waiting for trial and prisoners who have received their sentence. Most figures are for year 2000. Sources are Walmsley (2000) and Christie (2000).

Table 1 gives the information for Western Europe. As a general tendency, the Scandinavian countries have low prison populations, none of them with more than 70 prisoners per 100,000 inhabitants. At the top in Western Europe is Portugal, with the UK in second place.

Table 2 demonstrates the dramatic differences between Western Europe and Central and Eastern Europe. The Russian Federation is at the very top in

Table 1

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