wish to make different impressions on the same target at various times. Certain impressions are so widely valued that people try to convey those impressions on a regular basis. For example, people usually want to be perceived as attractive rather than unattractive, likable rather than unlikable, and competent rather than incompetent. In addition, people assume that targets like those who try hard and who possess certain virtues.

People who are playing to a target's values sometimes confront the self-presenter's dilemma. The more important it is for the person to impress the target, the more likely the target is to question the truthfulness of the person's self-presentations. People must also sometimes face the multiple audience problem in which they must present different images to two or more targets simultaneously.

When subjects who are participating in behavioral research try to convey impressions that they think the researcher will value, the validity of the data is compromised. As a result, behavioral researchers try to minimize the influence of subjects' self-presentational motives on the outcomes of their studies.

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CHAPTER

6

Current Social Image

CHAPTER OUTLINE

I've sometimes wondered how Richard Nixon felt when he ventured out in public in the years following Watergate. How was he affected by the knowledge that his image in most Americans' eyes remained irreparably tainted by the events that led to his resignation of the U.S. Presidency in 1974? How did knowing that people still viewed him unfavorably affect how he felt, what he did, what he said, and the ways in which he managed his impressions?

As people construct their public identities, they take into account what people know or are likely to find out about them. For example, their current social images constrain the range of impressions they even try to make. Given the country's preexisting impressions, Nixon found it difficult to convince most people that he was an honest, law-abiding

citizen no matter what he did. In addition, people's current images in others' eyes sometimes compel them to manage their impressions in particular ways. Knowing that, despite his protestations, he was widely regarded as a "crook," Nixon seemed to go out of his way to display attributes unrelated to the Watergate scandal, such as his extensive knowledge of foreign affairs; he conveyed the image of an elder statesman with an extensive knowledge of international relations. In this chapter, we examine how people's self-presentations are affected by how they think they are already regarded by other people.

Constraints

Some of my students returned from spring break in Florida one year with stories of having adopted new identities while they were on vacation. As they met new people—on the beach, in bars, at parties—they fabricated new persona, presenting whatever images of themselves struck them at the time. Not only did they fabricate new hometowns, families, colleges, and life histories, but they even tried on different personalities. One normally extraverted woman pretended to be painfully shy, while another characteristically reserved woman tried being outrageous and flirtatious. She even wore wild clothes that were quite different from the clothing she wears on campus. Apparently, this was great fun, and none of their new acquaintances ever realized that my students were not who and what they appeared to be.

Such self-presentational freedom is rare in social life. Typically, the impressions we try to make are constrained by the information that others have or are likely to get about us. We usually find it very difficult to present ourselves in ways that are inconsistent with the information that other people have. If others know that I grew up in a middle-class family in Baltimore, what could possibly be gained from claiming I lived in a wealthy neighborhood in Hollywood? If a job interviewer has our academic transcripts showing we were poor students, how can we claim otherwise? Our behavioral history constrains us to act as we've acted in the past. Once people have or are likely to obtain information about us, we recognize that the probability of making an alternative impression is low. When others do not have such information, however, we are freer to make whatever claims we wish about ourselves.

This effect was demonstrated in an experiment conducted by Barry Schlenker. Schlenker (1975) gave subjects bogus feedback indicating that they had scored either low or high on a test of social sensitivity. Subjects then thought that they would work as a group on a task that required the same skills that were measured by the test they had taken. Some subjects were told that the other group members would learn how well they performed on this task, whereas others thought no one (not even the experimenter) would know how well they had performed.

When asked to describe themselves to the other group members, subjects presented themselves consistently with how they had performed on the earlier test only when they thought that the other group members would learn of their performance on the upcoming task. When others would know about their scores on the upcoming task, subjects who performed well on the earlier test described themselves as more socially sensitive than those who thought they had performed poorly. However, subjects who thought their later performance would not be known by the group presented themselves favorably *regardless of how well they had performed on the test* (see also Baumeister & Jones, 1978; Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1985). As Schlenker (1975) observed, "secret information known only to the individual can be ignored when selecting a public image" (p. 1036).

PRINCIPLE:

People tend to present themselves in a self-enhancing way unless they think others have or are likely to obtain independent information that would contradict or discredit overly positive self-presentations.

Of course, people sometimes misjudge what a particular target knows about them. The result is usually a full-fledged self-presentational catastrophe. Not only does the truth about them come to light, but they come across as deceitful and manipulative. In one instance reported in the media, a woman reacted indignantly when a magazine offered to pay her to pose nude. "I would never under any condition pose naked for anyone," she claimed. "It's not in my character." Unfortunately, a news reporter had, in fact, obtained nude pictures of her. A person whose self-presentational claims are blatantly discredited in this way can rarely salvage the situation. This woman's response was typical: "Where did you ever——uhhhh!" (Overheard, 1991).

Although people generally convey impressions that are consistent with their current images in others' eyes, even public information can be ignored if the people believe that the target regards the source of the information as untrustworthy. Sometimes other people have information about us that they realize is of questionable accuracy because it is based on hearsay, comes from biased sources (such as our enemies), is ambiguous, or is otherwise invalid. When people think that a target

questions the accuracy of an information source, they may present themselves however they desire without fear that their self-presentations will be repudiated (Schlenker, Miller, & Leary, 1983).

The degree to which a person's self-presentations are constrained by others' knowledge obviously depends on how well others know him or her. In a highly mobile society in which people's lives are private and quite segmented, people have considerable self-presentational freedom. However, in close-knit societies in which virtually everyone lives his or her entire life in the same small village, self-presentational constraints are much greater. When everyone knows everyone else in a variety of contexts, certain kinds of self-presentation are restricted.

Baumeister, don Juan, and the Effects of Personal History

When I was in college in the early 1970s, most of the students I knew read one or more books by Carlos Castaneda. Castaneda received his Ph.D. in anthropology from UCLA in 1973 for interviewing an old Mexican sorcerer he called don Juan. Castaneda claimed that he had been don Juan's apprentice for over 10 years and reported the lessons he had learned in a series of popular books. Although considerable evidence exists that don Juan was a hoax (de Mille, 1980), Castaneda's books sold millions of copies. I've been amazed at how many people of my age group say that they were affected by Castaneda's writings.

Roy Baumeister was among those of us who were captured by don Juan's teachings. In particular, Baumeister was intrigued by don Juan's admonition that Castaneda should "erase" his personal history. According to don Juan, what others know about us encumbers or constrains what we can do. In *Journey to Ixtlan*, don Juan tells Carlos, "If you have no personal history, no explanations are needed; nobody is angry or disillusioned with your acts. And above all no one pins you down with their thoughts" (Castaneda, 1972, p. 12). This aspect of don Juan's teachings struck Baumeister as a neglected fact of social life: people are victims of their own behavioral history and of others' preexisting expectations for them (personal communication, June 14, 1992).

Much of Baumeister's research has focused on how preexisting public impressions affect people's behavior. As a graduate student working with Edward Jones, he showed how others' knowledge constrains people's self-presentations while at the same time impelling them to compensate for that information (Baumeister & Jones, 1978). Later, he showed that people with low versus high

(Continued)

self-esteem deal with this "dilemma of reputation" in different ways. People with high self-esteem seem to be less constrained by others' impressions of them than people with low self-esteem, who seem less willing to take the risk of trying to contradict others' expectations (Baumeister, 1982b).

He also found that, because people feel trapped by others' expectations, they sometimes try to diminish their reputation in others' eyes when they think others' expectations for them are too high (Baumeister, Cooper, & Skib, 1979). Recently, he has shown that knowing that others will learn information about them counteracts people's general tendency to ignore negative information about themselves (Baumeister & Cairns, 1992).

Roy Baumeister has made many important contributions to our understanding of self-presentation and self-processes more generally (Baumeister, 1986, 1991). For some reason, I find it gratifying that his initial interest sprung, in part, from the mythical teachings of don Juan.

Self-Presentational Successes

Typically, people who are sure that others already regard them positively refrain from trying to convey additional positive impressions of themselves. Rather, they opt instead to convey an impression of modesty. Subjects present themselves in a self-enhancing fashion when they think others are unaware of their successes but modestly if they think others know or will learn how well they have performed (Ackerman & Schlenker, 1975; Baumeister & Jones, 1978).

Modest self-presentations make a great deal of sense if others already hold a favorable impression of the individual. Not only do people respond favorably to slight modesty (Schlenker & Leary, 1982a), but little is to be gained by trying to make an increasingly positive impression on those who are already impressed. Others are likely to form unfavorable impressions of people who trumpet their successes. If others do not already hold a favorable impression of the person, however, they may take the person's modest self-presentational claims at face value, concluding that he or she is, in fact, not very good (Schlenker & Leary, 1982a). Alternatively, they may come to believe that the person is simply insecure (Schlenker, 1980).

However, modest self-presentations may backfire if others interpret one's modesty as nonchalance. Appearing to be indifferent about one's good qualities may convey to others that they are not worth the person's self-presentational effort. Shrugging off compliments, for example ("So? It's no big deal."), may make one appear indifferent to others' opinions. In addition, apparent indifference about one's successes may convey that one is so successful and confident that he or she has come to ignore success; the person comes across as smug rather than modest. I've personally felt that way toward researchers I know who seem to experience no pleasure when they have a manuscript accepted for publication in a scholarly journal. Any researcher who shrugs off having his or her work published is very used to success, has lost the capacity for joy, or is managing his or her impressions. Paradoxically, then, people may interpret extreme modesty as a sign of arrogance (Pin & Turndorf, 1990).

Self-Presentational Failures

Despite people's best efforts, things sometimes happen that threaten their images in others' eyes: a public failure undermines one's image of competence or success; other people learn previously secret information regarding one's weaknesses or transgressions; the person behaves in a manner that is out of character (because of rage, passion, or drunkenness, for example); other people intentionally humiliate the individual; or the individual fails to control his or her body in ways that make a bad impression (by clumsily tripping, being publicly flatulent, or failing to zip one's fly, for example). Social images and their accompanying reputations are fragile things that can be damaged in large and small ways by a variety of everyday occurrences.

Events that clearly (and, sometimes, irrevocably) damage a person's image in others' eyes are called self-presentational predicaments. **Self-presentational predicaments** are situations in which events have undesirable implications for the images people have claimed or desire to claim (Schlenker, 1980). In this section, we examine the causes of self-presentational predicaments, explore people's emotional reactions to such events, and discuss the self-presentational tactics people use to repair the damage that predicaments cause.

Categories of Self-Presentational Predicaments

There is no shortage of ways in which we can make bad impressions on others and convey impressions of ourselves we did not want to convey. It takes only a second for an interaction to derail as we look incompetent, foolish, clumsy, impolite, immoral, egocentric, inconsiderate, forgetful, or some other undesired way. Several theorists have developed taxonomies of predicaments (see Edelmann, 1987; Sattler, 1966; Weinberg, 1968), but the richest description comes from the work of Rowland Miller. (Miller was a student of Barry Schlenker, and, thus, is another branch on the self-presentational family tree.) Miller (1992) asked university students to describe their last embarrassment. Analyses of these descriptions yielded four major categories of embarrassing circumstances.

Individual Behavior

The first category involved incidents that were precipitated solely by an individual's own actions. Miller identified three distinct types of predicaments caused by a person's own behavior. **Normative public deficiencies** involve violations of norms or expectations. These predicaments include physical pratfalls and inept performances (such as falling down the stairs or dropping one's tray of food in the cafeteria), cognitive shortcomings (such as calling one's boyfriend or girlfriend by the wrong name or forgetting to return a borrowed item), loss of control over one's possessions or body (such as stalling one's car in traffic, ripping one's pants, or being noticeably flatulent), and failures of privacy regulation (such as being seen in one's underwear by strangers or walking in on someone in the bathroom).

A second category of predicaments induced by the individual's behavior involved **abashed harm-doing.** These are situations in which the person is embarrassed by harming others, such as breaking someone else's possession or spilling a drink on someone.

Behaviors that lead to mere conspicuousness constituted a third type of individual embarrassment. People sometimes feel embarrassed when they are the center of attention, particularly if they don't know how to respond in the situation.

Interactive Behavior

The second major category of embarrassing circumstances involves situations in which people are embarrassed because of their association or interactions with other people. For example, awkward interactions are embarrassing. When people do not know how to respond, they may become embarrassed. People may feel embarrassed meeting an ex-boyfriend or ex-girlfriend on the street simply because they don't know what to say. A second class of interactive embarrassment involves **team embarrassment** in which the person was with other people who did something embarrassing. In this case, the individual him- or herself did not provoke the predicament but was associated with other people who

were making a bad impression. We've all felt embarrassed by things that other people did when we were with them.

Audience Provocation

Audience provocation constituted the third category of embarrassing circumstances. I suspect that we've all been purposefully embarrassed by other people. When asked to describe their most recent embarrassment, nearly one fifth of the subjects in Miller's (1992) study described an audience-provoked predicament. We are embarrassed when people divulge our secrets and transgressions to others, when they make us the butt of their jokes, or when others tease or insult us. Being teased is a particularly common source of embarrassment during early adolescence but decreases during high school (Kauffman & Anderson, 1992).

Bystander Behavior

Finally, some cases of embarrassment arise from simply witnessing another person's embarrassing actions. I suspect we've all experienced **empathic embarrassment** (also called **vicarious embarrassment**) when another person tried to tell jokes that fell flat or when another student became embarrassed in front of the class.

Stigma

A special type of predicament is created by the existence of a physical or psychological stigma. Most people possess certain characteristics that, if publicly known, might lead others to regard them as deviant, flawed, limited, or otherwise undesirable. These so-called **marks** may involve past behaviors (the person is an ex-convict or spouse abuser, for example), physical characteristics (the person is deformed or disabled), personal character (the person is known to have an uncontrollable temper), psychological difficulties (the person was treated for schizophrenia), group membership (the person belongs to a disreputable group), occupation (the person is a prostitute or pornography dealer), or even ancestry (the person's father was a mass murderer). Most of us possess at least minor marks—mostly minor problems and indiscretions that would likely change some people's opinions about us for the worse if they were public knowledge.

When others become aware of a person's discrediting mark, they often react negatively, and the relationship or interaction between the people becomes derailed. When a mark leads other people to draw negative inferences about the marked person's abilities, personality, characteristics, or desirability, the mark becomes a **stigma,** and the person is said to be **stigmatized** (Goffman, 1963; Jones et al., 1984). People not only evaluate stigmatized persons unfavorably, but they also behave differently toward them. Because of this, stigmatized individuals engage in a number of self-presentational tactics to minimize the impact of their stigma on others' reactions toward them.

Concealment

Understandably, people usually prefer to hide their discrediting marks from other people. Some marks are easily concealed, whereas others are not. One may find it relatively easy to keep others from learning that he or she is HIV positive, spent time in prison, or is an alcoholic, for example. In contrast, people would find it more difficult to conceal the fact that they have disfiguring acne, committed a highly publicized crime, or stuttered badly.

People who try to conceal their marks often experience stress from the fear of detection. Furthermore, when others find out about the mark, they sometimes resent not having been told earlier, particularly if they are close friends (Jones et al., 1984). Thus, the marked person must decide the best time to disclose that he or she possesses the mark.

Some writers have suggested that an important step in deciding to tell others about one's marked condition is self-acceptance. People find it much more difficult to disclose marks to other people when they don't fully accept themselves. For example, one critical factor in gays' decisions to "come out of the closet" is accepting one's own homosexuality. Although self-acceptance is undoubtedly involved in decisions to include one's mark in one's self-presentations, self-acceptance alone is not enough. No matter how accepting marked people are of their own condition, they are reluctant to disclose it to others if such disclosure is likely to result in ridicule, criticism, or rejection. In a study of factors that predict gay men's and lesbians' willingness to disclose their sexual orientation to others, the best predictor of respondents' openness about their sexual orientation was not their own self-acceptance but how they thought other people felt about homosexuals (Franke & Leary, 1991).

Admission and Destigmatization

Often, stigmatized people purposefully convey their stigma to others. Rather than exerting the effort to hide it, they find it easier to simply acknowledge the mark, then take steps to either insure that it doesn't loom too large in the minds of other people or to try to destigmatize their condition altogether (Goffman, 1963).

The simplest type of destigmatization is simply to deny that the mark should be regarded negatively. By publicly downplaying the stigma, a person can convey the impression of having grace in the face of adversity. Occasionally, marked people use self-deprecating humor about their difficulties to show they have come to terms with their disabilities (Jones et al., 1984). If the person successfully conveys that

he or she does not regard the mark as a stigma, he or she may even gain credit for maintaining composure, optimism, and humor in spite of the mark.

Another type of destigmatization involves admitting the negative mark but arguing that it is beyond the person's control and, thus, people should not form negative impressions of the person because of it. People seem to feel more justified acting negatively toward those whose stigma is perceived as controllable than those whose stigma is not controllable (Farina, Holland, & Ring, 1966; Rodin, Price, Sanchez, & McElligot, 1989).

A third type of destigmatization involves turning a stigma from a liability to a benefit. People can reframe their stigmas to glorify them. Physical limitations may be romanticized, for example, as long as they are not grotesquely disfiguring (Jones et al., 1984). Injuries and scars obtained in battle, for example, may be worn like badges of honor. At minimum, people can argue that their experience with the stigma has made them stronger, increased their empathy for other stigmatized people, or taught them other lessons.

Occasionally, members of a stigmatized group work together toward destigmatizing themselves. For example, the civil rights and black power movements were designed not simply to attain equal rights for blacks but to destigmatize dark skin, as exemplified in the phrase "black is beautiful" (Jones et al., 1984). Other examples include the Anti-Defamation League, the National Association for Retarded Citizens, and many gay rights organizations. Interestingly, many unmarked people may join to destigmatize a particular condition, as when whites join the civil rights movement or when heterosexuals argue for greater societal tolerance of homosexuality.

Compensation

People who have a known stigma sometimes try to compensate for it by conveying more positive impressions of themselves on other dimensions. In one study, normal subjects who thought another person believed they were mental patients performed significantly better on skillful tasks, presumably to dispel the impression they were mentally incompetent (Farina, Allen, & Saul, 1968). This is similar to the compensatory self-presentation effect that occurs after people have publicly failed (Baumeister & Jones, 1978).

Exploitation

Some stigma can be exploited for the marked person's benefit. Stigma that involve physical or mental limitations are particularly susceptible to exploitation. The marked person can advertise his or her condition, thereby eliciting sympathy, support, and other special treatment.

Stigmatized persons can also exploit their stigmas by using them to excuse other problems. By playing up their handicaps, people can blame their difficulties on their shortcomings or on others' prejudicial treatment of them.

Resignation

Finally, stigmatized people may realize that nothing can be done to either counteract or exploit their stigmas. In such cases, the person may resign him- or herself to the fact that others regard him or her unfavorably. Such a realization often leads to self-presentational resignation. If a person cannot change others' views of the stigma, why bother worrying about what they think?

Kowalski and Chapple (1993) demonstrated such an effect with the stigma of menstruation. Since earliest time, menstruating women have been stigmatized. In extreme cases, they have been isolated from other members of the community or thought to contaminate food, crops, and other people. Even in modern societies, menstruation is viewed as a taboo topic for discussion, and women learn to conceal the fact they are menstruating (Weideger, 1976).

In their study, menstruating and nonmenstruating women were told that a male interviewer either was or was not aware of their menstruating condition. Women who thought the man knew they were menstruating seemed to experience self-presentational resignation. They not only perceived that the man liked them less (thereby showing that they thought he viewed menstruation as a stigma), but they were less motivated to make an impression on him.

Embarrassment

As we all know from personal experience, making blatantly bad impressions on others can be very unpleasant. The hallmark of this experience is what we commonly call **embarrassment,** which is a feeling of mortification and chagrin that follows threats to one's public image (Edelmann, 1987; Miller, 1992; Schlenker, 1980). People who are embarrassed feel awkward, flustered, self-conscious, and otherwise ill at ease (Parrott & Smith, 1991).

Embarrassment has proven to be an intriguing emotional reaction. The embarrassed individual reports feeling nervous and tense with a sense of dread about having made a bad impression (Miller, 1986). In many ways, embarrassment seems like a type of anxiety (Leary, 1983c). However, embarrassment is clearly something other than intense anxiety per se. Part of the evidence for this comes from the fact that embarrassed people often blush, whereas when people are anxious or afraid, they do not blush—they blanch! The activation of the sympathetic

nervous system that accompanies states of anxiety reduces the blood flow to peripheral veins, including those in the face. As a result, people who are frightened often look pale and have cold hands. Embarrassed people, on the other hand, show increased blood flow to the face paired with decreased blood flow to the extremities (Leary, Rejeski, Britt, & Smith, 1993). This is a highly unusual combination. We'll return to the matter of blushing later in the chapter.

The Function of Embarrassment

Embarrassment is universally unpleasant. I can't imagine anyone ever wanting to be embarrassed. Although embarrassment is a distressing experience—one we usually hope to avoid—it may actually serve an important function (Miller & Leary, 1992). Because people who make unfavorable impressions on others are derogated, ignored, shunned, punished, or ostracized, it is in the individual's best interests to maintain at least a minimally acceptable image in others' eyes. In fact, this is one reason that people impression-manage to begin with.

But people would not be appropriately circumspect about their public images unless a psychological mechanism existed to deter them from doing things that make the sorts of bad impressions that lead to rejection. Embarrassment may be precisely this kind of mechanism. Because embarrassment is aversive, people will usually try to avoid it, which means they will try to behave in ways that do not make undesired impressions. Furthermore, once they have made an undesired impression, they will try to remedy the situation to alleviate their feelings of embarrassment. In some ways, embarrassment has the properties of a drive state that promotes efforts to maintain and repair one's social image.

The capacity for experiencing social discomfort—including embarrassment—may have evolved because people who were distressed about others' impressions and evaluations of them were more likely to survive and reproduce than those who acted without regard for others' judgments (Miller & Leary, 1992). Early humans who were responsive to social pressures to be the "right" kind of person—competent, rule abiding, and socially desirable—were less likely to be rejected, ostracized, banished, or killed and, thus, more likely to survive and reproduce (Baumeister & Tice, 1990; Miller & Leary, 1992). I find the analogy between embarrassment and physical pain compelling. Just as we would be unlikely to survive without pain to deter us from harming our physical well-being, we would be unlikely to survive without embarrassment to deter us from harming our social well-being (Baumeister & Tice, 1990; Miller & Leary, 1992).

An Embarrassment Paradox

As we've seen, embarrassment arises most commonly when people are in a self-presentational predicament and believe they have conveyed undesired images of themselves. In light of this, let me pose a puzzling situation in which many people report they would be embarrassed, but yet the source of the self-presentational threat is not clear.

First, would it embarrass you to undress with a close family member of your own sex in the room? For example, if you are male, would it bother you to undress in the same room with your father or brother? If you are a woman, would undressing in the same room with your mother or sister bother you? Most people have told me that it would not embarrass them to undress in front of close family members of the same sex, or even close friends, for that matter.

Now, if you are not married, imagine for a moment that you are. Would it embarrass you to undress in front of your spouse? When I ask people this question, they look at me like I've lost my mind; "Of course not," they all say.

Fine. You wouldn't be embarrassed to undress in front of a same-sexed family member nor in front of your spouse. What if the same-sexed family member and your spouse were *both* in the room? Most (though not all) people I've asked tell me that they would feel embarrassed to undress in this situation. Why?

Some people have suggested that they would be embarrassed by the sexual connotation in the situation, but I don't follow that logic. There's nothing sexual involved, and both your family and spouse know that you have gotten dressed and undressed in front of the other before. In fact, it wouldn't bother you if your family knew you were changing clothes in front of your spouse in the next room, or if your spouse knew you were changing clothes in front of a same-sex family member. So why are many people embarrassed when both are present?

I have no idea.

Saving and Repairing Face

As we've seen, people try hard not to create self-presentational predicaments that will prove embarrassing. Despite their best efforts, however, everyone encounters situations that convey undesired impressions of themselves

to others. Sometimes people can save face by pretending that the predicament did not occur at all. People may apply this "studied nonobservance" to their own behavior (as when they do not indicate that it was *their* stomach that rumbled) or to the behavior of others (as when one pretends not to notice that someone else has stumbled) (Goffman, 1955).

However, more often, self-presentational predicaments cannot be ignored. When people believe they have made an undesired impression on others, they typically take active steps to repair their image. Generally speaking, these **remedial tactics** or **face-saving behaviors** may involve one or more of the following self-presentational tactics: apologies, accounts, and compensatory self-presentation.

Apologies

When people apologize, they accept responsibility for what they said or did while asking to be pardoned (Schlenker, 1980). **Apologies** and expressions of remorse are nearly always expected in predicaments that harm other people, and the failure to apologize exacerbates the person's self-presentational predicament. Even children as young as three years old evaluate transgressors who apologize more favorably than those who don't (Darby & Schlenker, 1982).

Not all predicaments are equally distressing. The severity of a predicament is a function of two things. The more undesirable the impression that is created and the greater the person's apparent responsibility for the behavior that led to that impression, the more severe the predicament and the greater the person's embarrassment (Schlenker, 1980). For most minor predicaments, an apology alone will rectify the situation. If I clumsily bump into another person in a crowd, a simple "I'm sorry" is usually sufficient. The apology shows that I am not a bad person (I wasn't intentionally hurtful) and that, because I already regret my behavior, I do not need to be reprimanded or punished (Goffman, 1971; Schlenker, Weigold, & Doherty, 1991). However, for more severe predicaments—ones that convey a very negative impression of oneself—a perfunctory apology is rarely sufficient. Simply apologizing for molesting a child will not rehabilitate the person in others' eyes.

A study by Schlenker and Darby (1981) showed that the kinds of apologies people use are affected by both the severity of the offense and by the person's apparent responsibility for it. For example, when the consequences of one's behavior were minor, people said they would offer a perfunctory apology (such as simply saying "Pardon me"). However, as severity increased, subjects were more likely to say they were sorry, express feelings of remorse, explicitly ask for forgiveness, and offer to help the victim.

Elaborate apologies are clearly advantageous from a self-presentational perspective. People who offer more elaborate apologies are evaluated more favorably, liked more, blamed less, and more likely to be forgiven (Darby & Schlenker, 1982, 1989). This is true even when the infraction was very minor; thus, it seems best to err on the side of overapologizing rather than underapologizing.

Accounts

In addition to apologizing, people caught in self-presentational predicaments often offer accounts. An **account** is a verbal explanation for unexpected, unacceptable, or unsatisfactory behavior that is designed to rectify a self-presentational predicament (Gonzales, Pederson, Manning, & Wetter, 1990; Schlenker, 1980; Scott & Lyman, 1968). Put simply, accounts are self-presentational tactics designed to reduce the likelihood that others will draw undesirable inferences about the character or worth of an individual who is enmeshed in a self-presentational predicament (Gonzales et al., 1990). If I am late for our meeting, I am likely to provide you with an account for my tardiness. A person trying to account for his or her behavior has three general options: refusals, excuses, and justifications (Austin, 1956; Schlenker, 1980).

Defenses of Innocence

The ultimate account is a **defense of innocence** (also called a **refusal**) in which the person denies any and all responsibility for the event in question. Essentially, a defense of innocence says, "I didn't do it." If others accept this type of account as valid, the person's predicament is resolved.

Excuses

Often, however, people cannot deny all responsibility for a predicament-creating event, in which case they may offer **excuses.** People use excuses to reduce their perceived responsibility for an undesirable event. The intent is to reduce the negativity of the impressions others form by denying some or all responsibility for the action. One type of excuse—a **plea of ignorance**—occurs when people claim that they didn't intend or fully foresee the consequences of their behavior. After all, people usually can't be held fully responsible for things they couldn't or didn't foresee (although they might be criticized for not foreseeing something they should have).

Another type of excuse involves **mitigating circumstances** in which the person suggests that he or she did not have a normal amount of control over the event and, thus, couldn't really help it. When people

claim that they behaved as they did because they were tired, under stress, drunk, or ill, for example, they are using mitigating excuses. Similarly, claiming that other people forced or pressured them to perform the behavior may absolve them of some responsibility.

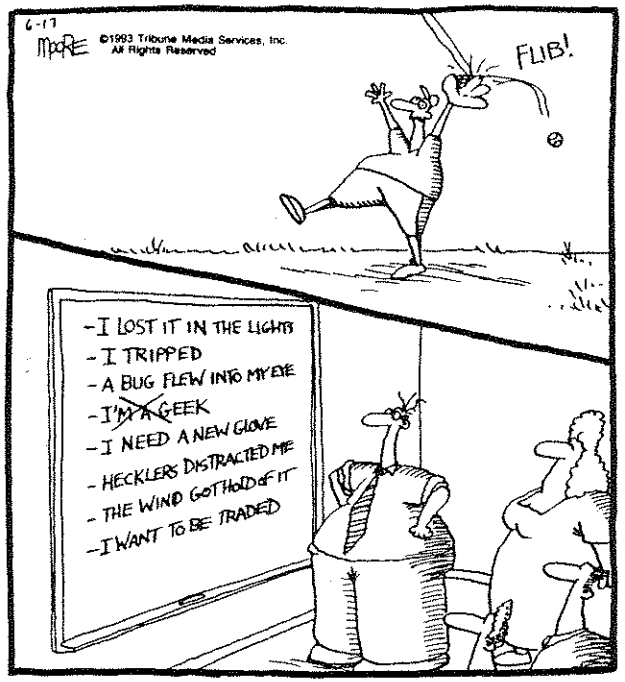
Third, people may try to excuse their behavior through **diffusion of responsibility.** With this excuse, the person argues that responsibility for the event was shared by a number of people and, thus, he or she was not as responsible as might first appear. "Yes, I helped soap the car windows on Halloween, but seven other people did it too, so it's not all my fault."

Justifications

Whereas people use excuses to minimize how responsible they appear for bad events, they use **justifications** to characterize their behavior as more appropriate, desirable, or defensible than it might at first appear. With justifications, people accept personal responsibility for their behavior ("Yes, I did it."), but provide reasons why the behavior was not really all that bad. For example, people may use **direct minimization** in which they emphasize that the event was not as bad as it might appear (Schlenker, 1980). In defending his cheating on a test, a student might say, "It really didn't hurt anybody." Closely related to minimization is **claimed beneficence** in which people suggest not only that their behavior was not bad, but that it was possibly beneficial ("Yes, I forgot our date on Sunday night. But at least you got extra time to study for the test you had on Monday.")

People may also justify their behavior by comparing it to other actions that are even worse—**comparative justification.** Sometimes this sort of justification involves comparison with other people. The message is: "What I did wasn't nearly as bad as what other people do." ("Sure, I cheated a little on my income taxes, but that's nothing compared to what a lot of people get by with.") At other times, comparative justification involves comparison to one's own behavior at other times. ("Yes, I got drunk again, but not nearly as drunk as I usually do.") A third type of comparison is with a hypothetical scenario. ("Yes, I carelessly dropped the baby, but at least he didn't break any bones.") In each case, the attempt is to characterize the behavior as less negative by comparing it to even worse actions.

In **principled justification,** the person explains that, although his or her behavior resulted in negative consequences, it was justified by higher principles or goals. In victim derogation, for example, people justify having hurt other people by stressing that the victim deserved it. In victim benefaction, the action is justified by claiming that it actually helped the person who seemed to be hurt. Parents use this justification when they punish their children "for their own good."



Within seconds, Ernie's team of image consultants springs into action mapping out damage control for post-game interviews.

FIGURE 6.1
Athletes often provide accounts for performance during a game.
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I should point out that we usually speak of excuses and justifications in disparaging terms, but excuses and justifications are not necessarily deceitful. People can provide accounts that are either true or false. Excuses may be accurate (I really didn't mean to do it.), and justifications may be true (I really did do it for a good reason.). On the other hand, we sometimes use excuses and justifications that present a picture of the situation that we know isn't true.

Avoiding Accounts

In some instances, people think they can best protect their social images if they avoid giving an account altogether (Scott & Lyman, 1968). For example, individuals sometimes claim that they are invulnerable to accounting because of their power or position. Few dictators feel the need to account for their actions. In some cases, the person may even challenge others' right to ask for an account ("How dare you ask me where I was last night!").

In some cases, people avoid accounts by using **mystification.** In mystification, people explain that they cannot explain the reasons for their behavior. "If you knew the whole story, you'd understand why I did what I did," they say. "But I can't tell you the whole story."

Political Accounts

An important part of the life of politicians and public officials involves explaining their decisions to others. Not only do citizens in a democracy deserve to know why their elected officials made certain decisions, but such decisions have implications for the official's success and re-election. Of course, the need for accounting increases when the official's behavior puts him or her in a self-presentational predicament (McGraw, Timpone, & Bruck, in press).

Political predicaments seem to be of two kinds. First, politicians' public images are tarnished by policy decisions that are unpopular among their constituents (McGraw, 1990). Research suggests that principled justifications are more effective in reducing constituents' negative reactions to unpopular decisions than other kinds of accounts (McGraw, 1991; McGraw et al., in press). In the context of a political decision, a principled justification explains that a controversial decision was justified by higher principles. Attorney General Janet Reno justified her decision to authorize the FBI to batter the walls of the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, by explaining that children inside the compound were being abused. (Interestingly, the Justice Department's final report on the episode, in which 87 cult members died, was more of a "defense of innocence," finding no fault with the FBI's tactics; Periscope, 1993).

Not only may principled justifications increase acceptance of a controversial decision (and thereby improve the public official's image), but it may turn political loss into political gain if constituents are convinced that the official deserves credit for a beneficial decision (McGraw et al., in press). In contrast, excuses do not work well as accounts for politically controversial decisions (McGraw, 1990, 1991). The public is unlikely to accept the excuse that an official wasn't really responsible for a decision he or she made.

A second type of political predicament results from personal misconduct. Although research on this topic does not exist, I suspect that excuses are more effective in the case of personal misconduct than controversial decisions. A public official accused of sexual misconduct, corruption, or other ethical indiscretions is unlikely to change public opinion by trying to justify his or her

(Continued)

behavior. ("Yes, I sexually harassed 24 women, but there were many benefits.") Rather, they will try to excuse the behavior, either by denying responsibility altogether or by showing how they were not entirely responsible (I was under stress/I had a drinking problem/My marriage was in trouble/etc.).

Compensatory Self-Presentation

When others have information about us that would contradict the impressions we want to make, we sometimes try to compensate for the negative impression by presenting particularly positive impressions on some other dimension, one that is not related to the negative information people have about us. Research shows that when people realize that others have an unfavorable impression, they may try to compensate by presenting themselves more favorably in other areas (Baumeister, 1982a; Baumeister & Jones, 1978; Leary & Schlenker, 1980). For example, if you know that I am a lousy tennis player, I will probably not try to dispel you of that impression but instead tell you about the marathon I ran.

Similarly, when people face a self-presentational predicament because they violated some moral or legal code, they often go out of their way to do nice things for people. Although people may engage in prosocial behavior following a transgression for a number of reasons (such as to relieve their own guilt), evidence suggests that one reason is to repair the person's image in others' eyes (Tedeschi & Riordan, 1981). After people do something bad, they are understandably concerned about the inferences other people are drawing about them. By doing prosocial things, the harm-doer can convey that he or she is not such a bad person after all.

Self-presentational compensation serves two functions for the person who thinks others have an undesired impression of him or her. Most obviously, when compensatory self-presentation is directed toward the target who holds an unflattering view of the person, it serves to repair the person's damaged image.

However, compensatory self-presentation is sometimes directed toward targets who do not have a negative impression of the individual. For example, people who appear foolish in front of one target sometimes try to convey a particularly positive impression to *other* targets who did

not witness the self-presentational predicament (Apsler, 1975). Having looked like a fool to one person, people can repair their damaged mood and self-esteem by making good impressions on other targets.

Nonverbal Embarrassment Displays

When people encounter self-presentational predicaments, they not only engage in verbal remedial behaviors to help them save face, but they tend to display a stereotypic set of nonverbal behaviors. This **embarrassment display** consists of three primary elements that occur across various cultures: facial blushing, gaze aversion, and nervous smiling (Edelmann & Iwawaki, 1987).

Facial Blushing

People who encounter self-presentational predicaments often experience an increase in blood flow to the face, neck, and ears, often accompanied by the visible reddening or darkening of the face that we call blushing.[1] The social blushes that arise from embarrassing circumstances can be physiologically and psychologically distinguished from facial flushing that occurs for nonsocial reasons (for example, flushes due to alcohol consumption, sexual arousal, physical exertion, and menopause).

If I ask you to recall the last time you blushed, it likely involved a situation in which you were concerned with others' impressions of you. In fact, Darwin (1892/1955) concluded that blushing "depends in all cases on . . . a sensitive regard for the opinion, more particularly for the depreciation of others" (p. 335). People often blush when they've appeared incompetent, immoral, foolish, or otherwise socially undesirable.

Although self-presentational predicaments such as these are the most obvious causes of blushing, people also blush in response to being complimented, praised, or honored (Leary & Meadows, 1991). Furthermore, people may blush even when others simply scrutinize or stare at them, such as when they speak before audiences or are the center of attention (one common cause of blushing is having others sing "Happy Birthday to You;" Leary & Meadows, 1991). People even blush when other people simply accuse them of blushing, even when they're not ("Aw, look; she's blushing.").

[1]Although blushing may be imperceptible in blacks, Native Americans, and other dark skinned peoples, all racial groups experience facial vasodilation in response to undesired social attention and self-presentational predicaments.

The fact that people blush in situations other than obvious self-presentational predicaments demonstrates that, contrary to the popular view, blushing is not simply a response to embarrassing predicaments. My view is that blushing is a reaction to **undesired social attention** (Leary et al., 1992). Although people often desire attention from others and find it rewarding, in some situations people do not want social attention. One set of situations in which people find social attention undesired and aversive involves self-presentational predicaments. People who have behaved in ways that others view as incompetent, immoral, foolish, or otherwise undesirable understandably find social attention aversive and would prefer to be ignored for the time being. Yet in these kinds of situations, people usually feel that everyone is looking at them (Silver, Sabini, & Parrott, 1987). Thus, people do not blush in self-presentational predicaments because they are embarrassed or ashamed, as has been widely assumed, but because they are the objects of undesired social attention (Leary et al., 1992).

Gaze Aversion

People who think they've made a bad impression on others tend to avert their gaze and avoid eye contact with other people (Edelmann, 1987; Modigliani, 1971). In fact, when embarrassed, people find it difficult to meet the gaze of other people even if they want to.

Nervous Smiling

The third component of the embarrassment display involves a silly, nervous grin (Edelmann, 1987). On the surface, this smile is quite paradoxical; after all, embarrassed people rarely feel like smiling. In fact, this nervous smile is easily distinguished from a genuine smile of happiness or amusement (Asendorpf, 1990). The smile itself is more of a self-conscious grin than a genuine smile, and the eyes appear vacant rather than bemused.

Nonhuman Appeasement

Why do people display this stereotypic pattern of behavior when they think they've made an undesired impression? Why should such a reaction have evolved? Part of the answer to this question may involve similarities between human embarrassment displays and the appeasement behaviors of other primates. When facing a physical or social threat from a member of their own species, many other primates, such as chimpanzees and baboons, engage in behaviors that diffuse the threat, thereby avoiding aggression and maintaining the individual's position in the group.

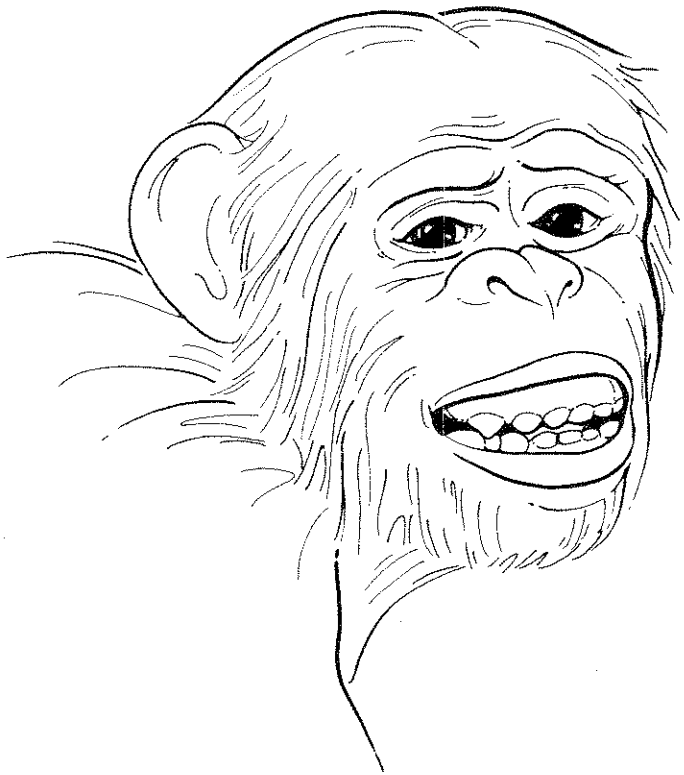

FIGURE 6.2
The appeasing grin of many nonhuman primates bears a striking resemblance to the silly, sheepish smile of people who feel embarrassed.

Three aspects of these appeasement behaviors are relevant to understanding human embarrassment displays. First, when a lower status primate is threatened by a higher status one, the lower status animal invariably averts his or her eyes, or at least looks at the dominant primate obliquely (van Hooff, 1972). In fact, gaze aversion is a central component of primate appeasement (Altmann, 1967). As we discussed on the previous page, people who find themselves in a self-presentational predicament typically avert their gaze in much the same way.

Second, under certain circumstances, appeasement and submission in nonhuman primates involves a vacant, mirthless grin. This grin, which Goodall (1988) called the "full closed grin," is easily distinguished from both friendly smiles of affiliation and aggressive teeth baring (van Hooff, 1972). As you can see in Figure 6.2, this appeasing grin is quite similar to the embarrassed smile in humans.

Third, although I've found no evidence that other primates blush (although their faces flush for other reasons), blushing and nonhuman appeasement share a common cause. A steady gaze from a more dominant animal is a primary elicitor of appeasement behaviors in nonhuman primates (Bolwig, 1978; Chevalier-Skolnikoff, 1973; Miller, 1975). As we saw, people often blush when others stare at them; in fact, blushing may be a response to undesired social attention.

Considered together, these similarities suggest that human embarrassment displays are loosely analogous to appeasement behaviors in nonhuman primates (Leary et al., 1992). They are behaviors that occur in socially threatening situations when one's image and social standing are in jeopardy. Traditionally, ethologists have viewed nonhuman appeasement as a way of averting aggression among conspecifics (Bolwig, 1978; Manning, 1972; Walters & Seyfarth, 1987). Displays of appeasement deter physical aggression among nonhumans, partly by leading the threatening animal to lose interest in the less dominant one. Once an animal appeases, the higher status animal usually breaks its gaze and wanders away (Bolwig, 1978; van Hooff, 1972).

Embarrassment displays seem to have similar effects. Obvious signs of embarrassment—such as downcast eyes, nervous grinning, and blushing—seem to placate other persons when the individual has performed behaviors that would otherwise result in unfavorable evaluations (Goffman, 1959; Semin & Manstead, 1982). Contrast two situations: one in which a person who performs an undesirable behavior (by belching in public, for example) appears nonplussed, against one in which the individual conveys that he or she is embarrassed. I think your impression will be more positive of the person who engages in an embarrassment display.

Summary

People's self-presentations take into account how they are perceived by other people as well as how they might be perceived by others in the future. What others know or are likely to find out about us constrains the kinds of images we can claim and leads us to regulate our impressions to compensate for our current social image. People who believe they are already conveying a desired impression often reduce the positivity of their self-presentations in a show of modesty, whereas people who experience a self-presentational predicament or possess a stigma usually try to compensate for it.

Embarrassment is the emotional experience that results from real or imagined self-presentational predicaments. Although it is unpleasant,

embarrassment may motivate people to protect their social images and to engage in remedial behaviors when their images are damaged. People repair damage to their social images through nonobservance, apologies, accounts (e.g., excuses and justifications), and compensatory self-presentation. People in a self-presentational predicament also engage in nonverbal embarrassment displays (blushing, smiling, gaze aversion) that may be related to the appeasement behaviors observed in other primates.

CHAPTER

7

Instrumental Complementarity

CHAPTER OUTLINE

We are all amateur psychologists. Even without formal training in the principles of human behavior, most people have a basic understanding of what makes people tick, and they regularly use this knowledge to influence others to behave as they desire. Even though you may not know me personally, I suspect that you could easily figure out how to make me angry, how to get me to help you, or how to make me feel afraid of you. And, in part, you could elicit these reactions purely through your self-presentations. If you wanted to make me feel angry, you could give me the impression that you are rude, egocentric, and totally unconcerned about