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Impression Management and Interpersonal Behavior
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CHAPTER

1

Introduction

CHAPTER OUTLINE

If you were raised like many Americans, I suspect that your parents tried to teach you not to worry about what other people thought of you. Americans have a maxim that says that we should rarely be concerned about others' opinions of us. "Just be yourself. March to your own drummer. Don't worry about what other people will think."

In spite of widespread lip service to this view, you probably grew up realizing that people are, in fact, often very concerned about how other people perceive and evaluate them. Virtually everyone thinks about other people's impressions of him or her from time to time, and some people worry a great deal about how others regard them. Furthermore, just about everybody occasionally behaves in ways that he or she hopes will lead others to form particular impressions of him or

her. The reason is clear: despite what our parents told us, most of us realize that the impressions we make on other people *do* make a difference.

When people interact, they are responding to the impressions they have of one another. Sometimes those impressions are accurate; sometimes they are not. Either way, the impressions people form strongly affect how they respond to one another. As a result, few social situations exist in which people can afford to disregard totally how others are perceiving and evaluating them.

The Nature of Self-Presentation

Given the importance of others' perceptions in social interaction, we should not be surprised that people keep an eye on how others regard them and, from time to time, try to control the impressions people have of them. The process of controlling how one is perceived by other people is called **self-presentation** or **impression management** (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Schneider, 1981; Schlenker, 1980).

Contrary to what our parents tried to teach us, self-presentation is not always a bad thing. Rather than reflecting manipulativeness, vanity, or insecurity, paying an appropriate degree of attention to others' impressions is healthy and adaptive. Think for a moment about what the world would be like if no one ever cared about what other people thought of him or her. Think about how people might act if they didn't care what others thought. Think how they would look, what they might say, how they'd probably smell!

If people showed no regard for others' perceptions of them, they would fare quite poorly in life. Because our concern with others' impressions helps keep our behavior within socially appropriate limits, people who were unconcerned with others' impressions would often behave inappropriately, resulting in negative reactions ranging from disparagement to ostracism. They might laugh at funerals, wear swimwear to the office, or never bathe. They certainly wouldn't try to put their best foot forward when the situation called for it. As a result, they would have serious difficulties in job interviews and on first dates. Even if initially successful, the tactless person who never impression-managed would have trouble keeping jobs, friends, and lovers.

Furthermore, a certain degree of attention to one's self-disclosures to other people is essential for the formation of close relationships (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993). People who don't convey an appropriate amount and type of information about themselves to other people have difficulty developing and maintaining friendships and romantic relationships.

That's not to say that self-presentation is never problematic. Although it's an essential component of social interaction, concerns with others' impressions can create difficulties. For example, people are sometimes too concerned about what others think of them, or they are concerned about their impressions in situations that are inappropriate. As we'll discuss in later chapters, people's self-presentational concerns can also interfere with their performance on important tasks, cause them to feel anxious, and lead them to do things that are harmful to themselves or to other people. Yet, despite these problems, there is nothing inherently bad or sleazy about self-presentation.

Few aspects of people's behavior are unaffected by self-presentational motives. Sometimes people act in certain ways primarily and explicitly to foster a certain impression. When a man tells his date about his glory days as a college athlete, a student cleans up his apartment when his parents are coming to visit, or a woman chooses the clothes she will wear on a job interview, their behavior is affected primarily by their desire to make certain impressions.

At other times, self-presentation is a secondary concern. But even when people's behavior is motivated by other goals, they typically pursue those goals in ways that do not jeopardize their image in others' eyes. As a student eats with friends in the cafeteria, her primary goal is to eat (and perhaps to enjoy the company of her friends), and self-presentational concerns are secondary. Even so, the student does not take food off others' plates without asking, wipe her mouth on her blouse, or belch loudly. When I am walking through a music store to buy a new compact disk, my primary goal is to buy the CD. But I pursue my goal in a way that doesn't create bad impressions. I walk—not run—through the store; I don't shout at people who get in my way; and I don't criticize other shoppers' choices of music, no matter how stupid I might think they are.

Thus, even when we are doing other things and impression management is not our primary goal, our behavior is usually constrained by our concerns with others' impressions. No matter what else we might be doing, we rarely intentionally do things that will make us appear incompetent, immoral, unattractive, or otherwise socially undesirable. (Of course, some of us may accidentally present such negative images of ourselves more often than we would like.) Self-presentation provides a constraint within which most other behaviors occur.

Self-Presentation and Deception

You don't need a psychologist to tell you that people sometimes lie about themselves. In extreme cases, people may con others into thinking they are someone or something they are not. More commonly, people may try to get others to form impressions that, although not completely false, are more positive than is warranted—that they are wealthier or more intelligent than they really are, for example.

Although some self-presentations are exaggerations and others are downright lies, most of the time the impressions people try to make on others are not deceptive. We are all multifaceted individuals, and in any given situation, we could convey many different impressions of ourselves, all of which are true. Rather than lying, people typically select the images they want others to form from their repertoire of true self-images. This selection is often tactical in the sense that it is based on their goals in the situation and on their assumptions about which impressions will best achieve those goals. But the impressions they ultimately try to create in others' minds are more often accurate rather than deceptive (Schlenker, 1980; Schlenker & Weigold, 1992).

If you and I met, what would we disclose about ourselves to one another? Would I tell you that I am a university professor and specifically a social psychologist? Would I mention that I run regularly, or that I once played in rock and jazz bands? Do I tell you that I enjoy football more than baseball, or confess that I know as little about cars as anybody else I know? Would I describe my childhood, my successes and failures, my goals in life?

I could convey any one of these impressions of myself to you, all of them truthful, but (as you would) I would be selective in the images I created. I'd probably be more likely to mention that I'm a psychologist if I knew you were a psychology student because I've found that nonpsychologists seem to think I'm going to analyze everything they say. I'm probably more likely to mention running if you look physically fit than if you look like you've never exercised a moment in your life. Unless I intentionally wanted to argue with you, I might not mention my musical interests if you enjoyed only classical music and were on a tirade about the decadence of popular music. If we're just talking about sports, I might mention my preference for football, but if you were a member of the university baseball team, I probably wouldn't. If you're a mechanic who's working on my car, I'm not likely to profess my ignorance about cars; if you get the impression I'm an automotive illiterate, who knows what you might try to pull off on me?

My point is that, although people sometimes present images of themselves that are not true, impression management usually involves accurate impressions colored by tactical changes in emphasis, tone, and omission. Sometimes the selection is completely self-serving (as when I fail to mention that I'm a psychologist because you might think I'm weird), but sometimes it's also for others' benefit (as when I don't brag about running a marathon to someone who's a couch potato).

Schlenker and Weigold (1992) suggested that believability is a very important consideration when people construct their social identities. If others do not regard the images that people project as reasonably accurate constructions of reality, they will be dismissed as manipulative, deceptive, or deluded. Furthermore, most people find it anxiety producing to project and maintain public images that they know are not true. Because of these considerations, people project truly deceptive self-presentations only in rare instances.

Unflattering Self-Presentations

Think for a moment of a specific instance in which you wanted other people to form a certain impression of you. Chances are the situation you imagined was one in which you wanted to make a positive or favorable impression. In most cases, we want others to perceive us in socially desirable ways. We would usually rather be regarded as competent than incompetent, as moral than immoral, and as attractive than as unattractive, and so on.

However, not all self-presentations are positive. In some cases, the impressions people try to convey are far from socially desirable. For example, people sometimes want to be seen as threatening or intimidating because such impressions will help them achieve their interpersonal goals. Perhaps you've had a boss who made sure his employees perceived him as gruff and intolerant to keep them in line. Similarly, a member of a street gang may dress and act in threatening ways so that people will be scared of him. Closer to home, most of us have tried to get rid of a bore by conveying an impression of hostility or disinterest (Schneider, 1981). In other cases, people may want to be seen as incompetent or weak because such impressions will lead others to help or support them. People will even try to be seen as unlikable if doing so helps them achieve their goals (Jellison & Gentry, 1978).

The primary goal of self-presentation is not to be perceived positively per se, but to influence other people to respond in desired ways

(Jones & Pittman, 1982). In most cases, people are more likely to treat us as we want them to when they have positive impressions of us—that we are friendly, competent, ethical, and attractive, for example. Because of this, the impressions people usually try to make are positive, socially desirable ones.

In other cases, however, people are more likely to be treated as they desire if they foster undesirable impressions in others' eyes. As we'll explore in detail later in the book, people sometimes think their interests will be best served if they can get others to perceive them as violent, incompetent, ill, or even mentally disturbed (Braginsky, Braginsky, & Ring, 1969; Jones & Pittman, 1982; Kowalski & Leary, 1990).

A Brief History of Self-Presentation Research

As a student, I cringed whenever the author of a book launched into a discussion of the history of his or her topic. But I see now that understanding something about the development of an area helps us understand the area itself—its emphases, biases, controversies, blind spots, and so on. So, please bear with me. I'll make this history as brief and as painless as possible.

Interest in self-presentation emerged somewhat independently at about the same time in psychology and sociology. Although it may seem that sociologists and psychologists (especially social psychologists) would have many things in common, connections between the disciplines have traditionally been weak, and sociologists and psychologists have typically relied little on each other's work. However, researchers interested in self-presentation would find it nearly impossible to carry out their work without relying on concepts, theories, and research from both sociology and psychology.

Goffman and the Sociological Approach

The systematic study of self-presentation began with the work of sociologist Erving Goffman. Although he wrote many essays relevant to the study of human interaction, Goffman's major contribution was *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, published in 1959. Goffman's basic premise was that many of the most revealing insights about social behavior are to be found not in analyzing people's inner motives or personalities, but in studying the surface appearances people create for one another. Whereas psychologists often look beyond people's overt behavior to understand their "true" underlying motives and characteristics, Goffman insisted that much can be gained by focusing on public behavior.

In the course of social life, people's responses to one another are heavily based on these surface appearances. Contrary to the advice we receive, we *do* judge books (and people) by their covers. And, because of this, people often present images of themselves that affect others' judgments and reactions. According to Goffman, a full understanding of human behavior requires that we pay attention to these public images. His view was consistent with Cooley's (1902) claim that "the imaginations which people have of one another are the solid facts of society" (p. 87).

For Goffman, people control how other people treat them by influencing others' definition of the situation. They influence others' definition of the situation by giving others the kind of impression that will lead them to act voluntarily in accordance with their objectives. "Thus, when an individual appears in the presence of others, there will usually be some reason for him to mobilize his activity so that it will convey an impression to others which it is in his interests to convey" (Goffman, 1959, p. 4).

According to Goffman, self-presentation is not only functional for the individual, but it is essential for smooth interaction. Effective social interaction requires that the interactants know a little about one another—about one another's socioeconomic status, attitudes, trustworthiness, competence, and so on. Yet, interactants often find it difficult to learn much about other people. Here's where self-presentation helps. The public images people convey give other interactants some idea of how they expect to be treated and how they should expect to treat others.

Goffman seemed particularly interested in what happens when self-presentation goes awry. When the impressions people project are contradicted or discredited, the interaction is disrupted. In fact, the interaction often grinds to a halt until the person's public image is successfully restored (Goffman, 1955, 1959, 1967). Goffman wrote extensively about embarrassment and face-work, topics we explore in later chapters.

Goffman has been associated with what is known as the "dramaturgical approach" because he made great use of metaphors of the theater, complete with acts, roles, props, audiences, and backstage areas. However, nowhere in his writings does Goffman argue that life is nothing but a stage or that men and women are merely actors. Rather, he used the idea of life as drama as an analogy or metaphor to elucidate certain facts about social life (Brissett & Edgley, 1990).

Goffman's work was more akin to social anthropology than sociology (indeed, his Master's degree was in anthropology). His articles and books were essentially anthropological descriptions of everyday interactions in Western society. Rather than recording the habits of the natives in some far-off land, he watched the interactions of people in the

British Isles and United States. Goffman was an astute observer of human behavior with the ability to see processes of social life in new ways and to describe them in an engaging fashion.

Jones and Social Psychology

At about the same time Goffman published *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life,* Edward Jones, a social psychologist, began a program of work on flattery. At the time, Jones was unfamiliar with Goffman's work but became involved with self-presentation because of his interest in how people figure out what other people are like. Jones realized that our perceptions of other people are determined in part by their attempts to convey particular impressions of themselves. As Jones (1990) put it, "the study of impression management and self-presentation is an integral part of the study of interpersonal perception. We cannot understand how people perceive each other without at the same time understanding the dynamics of self-presentation" (p. 170). Thus, from early work on how people ingratiate themselves to others (Jones, 1964; Jones & Wortman, 1973), Jones moved on to study many facets of the self-presentation process.

Jones' approach to research on self-presentation was quite different from Goffman's. Whereas Goffman reported what were essentially anthropological field observations in narrative essays, Jones and his students designed laboratory experiments to investigate specific factors that affect self-presentation. Goffman tried to *persuade* his readers of his insights through observations and anecdotes, whereas Jones tried to confirm and disconfirm particular theoretical ideas through controlled experimentation.

Jones' contribution to the study of self-presentation cannot be overestimated. Not only did he produce a wealth of empirical studies on the topic and offered important theoretical advances, but he trained several social psychologists who went on to make contributions to the area of self-presentation in their own right. We'll encounter the contributions of Jones and his students throughout this book.

Resistance to Self-Presentation

From the beginning, some social psychologists, as well as many lay people, were extremely interested in self-presentation. Many realized that a great deal of social behavior is affected by people's concerns with others' impressions of them. However, self-presentation did not begin to emerge as a mainline area of interest among behavioral researchers for many years, and some researchers initially displayed outright resistance to self-presentational approaches. Jones noted that, when he first became interested in self-presentation in the early 1960s, some of his colleagues seemed to feel that he had entered a domain of investigation that was "as unsettling and almost as disreputable as parapsychology" (personal communication, March 17, 1992). One manifestation of this disinterest in self-presentation was that, until recently, it was difficult to find the terms "self-presentation" or "impression management" in the indexes of most textbooks on social psychology.

The reasons for this resistance to the topic are not entirely clear, particularly when one considers how much of human behavior is affected by self-presentational motives. I recently asked four of the most productive researchers in the area of self-presentation—Edward Jones, James Tedeschi, Barry Schlenker, and Roy Baumeister—why they thought self-presentation had remained on the periphery of social psychology for so long. They offered four basic explanations.

Part of the resistance may have come from the fact that many psychologists initially viewed self-presentation as inherently manipulative and deceptive, the ugly underbelly of interpersonal life. As we have seen, self-presentation is not necessarily inauthentic, but this view may have led some to regard the topic as unsavory or unnecessarily narrow (see, for example, Buss & Briggs, 1984).

Furthermore, during the past 20 years, social psychology has been dominated by an interest in cognitive processes—attribution, person perception, social cognition, and the like—and motivational processes have taken a back seat. Because the study of self-presentation focused on people's interpersonal motives, it attracted less attention than certain other topics.

Third, during the 1970s, some researchers became frustrated by the fact that self-presentation theorists offered impression management as an alternative to accepted explanations of many interpersonal phenomena. It seemed to some that the self-presentation perspective could explain almost anything. Punching holes in a lot of other people's theoretical balloons didn't win the self-presentational perspective many allies. As Baumeister (1986) colorfully described it:

> Many psychologists had spent their lives and staked their careers on theories about inner motives. They were less than delighted to be told that their theories were egregiously mistaken, that they had overlooked a (or even *the*) main cause. They could not dismiss self-presentation, but they did not have to like it. Self-presentation grew up as an all-purpose alternative explanation for many other theories. It was greeted and treated like a rude bastard relative at a family gathering (p. vi).

Finally, although researchers interested in the topic approached self-presentation scientifically, discussion of self-presentational strategies

often sounded too much like the how-to-manipulate-others vein of "pop psychology." Many viewed impression management as an inherently applied topic more appropriately studied by politicians, advertisers, and business executives than by psychologists.

Interest in Self-Presentation Spreads

Over time, however, interest in self-presentation became more widespread. Initially, research focused primarily on identifying factors that affect the kinds of impressions people try to convey. In early studies, researchers studied variables such as the effects of status, interpersonal goals, expected interaction, other people's evaluations, and social feedback on people's self-presentations. Soon afterwards, however, researchers began to apply self-presentational perspectives to the study of other psychological phenomena, thereby demonstrating that a great deal of behavior is affected by people's concerns with what other people think of them. One of the first examples of the application of self-presentational concepts to other areas examined how hospitalized schizophrenics manage their impressions to appear either more or less mentally disturbed depending on the immediate social context (Braginsky, Braginsky, & Ring, 1969); we'll examine this fascinating line of work in detail in Chapter 6.

During the 1970s, researchers began to offer self-presentational explanations of many behaviors. For example, James Tedeschi and his students proposed that many behaviors that were originally explained as reactions to cognitive dissonance may actually reflect self-presentational strategies (Tedeschi, Schlenker, & Bonoma, 1971). Self-presentational perspectives were also applied to understanding aspects of aggression, helping, conformity, attribution, resource allocation, group decision-making processes, task performance, voting, exercise behavior, and leadership. More recently, self-presentational explanations have also been offered for an array of emotional and behavioral problems such as social anxiety, shyness, depression, hypochondriasis, anorexia, and underachievement. With the application of self-presentational perspectives to the study of psychological problems, interest in self-presentation spread into clinical and counseling psychology (Leary & Miller, 1986).

Over time, evidence for the viability of self-presentational explanations accumulated. Study after study showed that behavior was affected by people's desires for others to perceive them in particular ways. Furthermore, such findings were obtained for a wide variety of behaviors that spanned much of the content not only of social psychology, but

of other areas of psychology as well. By the mid-1980s, it was difficult to find an interpersonal behavior in which self-presentation was not occasionally involved (Baumeister, 1982a).

Along the way, the self-presentational perspective was expanded in such a way that it became more useful and palatable to a larger number of behavioral researchers. In his book, *Impression Management,* and other writings, Barry Schlenker (1980, 1985; Schlenker & Weigold, 1992) showed that self-presentation involves far more than attempts to gain approval and, thus, was applicable to understanding a great deal more about interpersonal behavior than simply how people get others to like them. As researchers began to apply self-presentational explanations to real-world problems, many people began to realize that it was not just a laboratory curiosity, but a potent human motive that pervades everyday life. Recent applications of self-presentational approaches to business and organizational settings have further demonstrated their usefulness (Giacalone & Rosenfeld, 1989, 1991).

Judging the Impact of One's Impressions

As we'll see throughout the book, impression management is a complicated psychological process. People who want others to form a particular impression of them cannot simply push a button or flick a switch to produce the desired effect. Many things can go wrong as people try to assess the most desirable impression to convey to particular targets in a given situation, adjust their behavior to foster the desired impression, and assess whether others have formed the impression they intended. Two considerations in particular complicate the impression-management process.

Because a given behavior can usually be interpreted in more than one way, people run the risk of conveying images other than those they wanted to make. For example, a person trying to be seen as intelligent may offer some esoteric information during a conversation only to come across as pompous, egg-headed, vain, or boring. Thus, we must distinguish between the impression that a person wanted others to form (the *calculated impression*) and the impressions that the person did not intend others to form (the *secondary impression*) (Schneider, 1981). Although unintended, the secondary impression is not always an undesirable one. For example, the person trying to appear intelligent may also come across as a good conversationalist. However, quite often, the secondary impression is inconsistent with how the person wants to be perceived.

Unfortunately for the person who is motivated to impression-manage, secondary impressions are difficult to anticipate and control because they rely as much on the style and appropriateness of a person's self-presentation as on its content (Schneider, 1981). For example, people sometimes find it difficult to determine whether other people will accept a particular self-disclosure at face value or whether something will make others suspicious of its accuracy. I'm sure you've sometimes been surprised when other people questioned the truthfulness of something you said about yourself even if your self-presentation was, in fact, honest. In such cases, your effort to create a particular calculated impression resulted in an undesired secondary impression (that you were being untruthful).

People may also be unable to anticipate all of the secondary inferences that others may draw from the calculated impression they intended. You may try to express your heartfelt thanks to a teacher or boss but realize that he or she interpreted your appreciation as crass ingratiation. Or, you may understate your accomplishments to a job interviewer so as not to be seen as braggardly, only to find that she inferred that you lack self-confidence.

The self-presentational difficulties created by undesired and unanticipated secondary impressions are compounded by the fact that people aren't always good judges of the impressions they are making. For people to make a desired impression, they obviously need to know how others perceive them; yet, research suggests that people do not always know the kinds of impressions they convey. People seem to have some idea of the kinds of impressions they generally make on others but are less accurate at determining how they are perceived by specific other people (DePaulo, Kenny, Hoover, Webb, & Oliver, 1987). In part, this is because how a particular other person responds to us depends not only on how that person perceives us, but also on that person's own personality (for example, how openly he or she expresses feelings about others). Thus, we sometimes find it difficult to determine what a particular other person thinks of us. However, as we look at our social interactions as a whole, we can get a better sense of how people in general regard us on particular dimensions.

Furthermore, research suggests that people overestimate how consistently other people perceive them. People seem to assume that most other people have similar impressions of them when, in fact, others' impressions may differ greatly (DePaulo et al., 1987). People tend to see themselves as relatively constant and unchangeable even when their behavior differs a great deal across different situations. As a result, they tend to think they come across similarly much of the time when, in reality, their behaviors may vary markedly from situation to situation.

Taken together, the fact that people are not perfect judges of others' impressions of them accounts for many of their self-presentational difficulties. Although events beyond their control sometimes damage their public images, people often fall victim to self-presentational miscalculations because of erroneous assumptions about how others perceive them. Of course, in many instances, people accurately judge how they are coming across, yet are nonetheless unable to convey the impressions they desire. Even so, knowing how one is being perceived is generally a prerequisite for successful impression management.

The Person and the Situation

Which is most important in understanding people's behavior—their personal characteristics (such as their personality, intelligence, genetic makeup, and life history) or the nature of the situation in which they find themselves (such as the characteristics of others who are present, the physical layout of the room, or the social norms that are operating)? Although much has been written over the years about this "person-situation debate," most psychologists today would agree that the question is a silly one.

Most behavior is a function of both the person and the situation. On one hand, the nature of the situation exerts a strong influence on our behavior. For example, we act differently at funerals than at weddings; we sometimes respond differently to superiors than to subordinates; we often interact differently with men than with women, and we react differently in crowded than uncrowded environments.

Even so, each person brings to the situation his or her unique personality, background, and physiological makeup so that two people in precisely the same situation may not respond in exactly the same way. Some people are typically outgoing, whereas others are introverted; some people are more argumentative than others; and some people try harder to please.

As we discuss self-presentation, we will repeatedly see that the impressions people try to create on others are a function of both the situation and the individual. Sometimes, the situation exerts considerable pressure on people to present themselves in particular ways; we must *appear* solemn at a funeral no matter how good we really feel. At the same time, however, people differ in the degree to which they are concerned about others' impressions of them and, thus, the degree to which they impression-manage at all. They also differ, as we will see, in how they want other people to see them.

An Overarching Framework

After many years of research, behavioral scientists have compiled a large amount of information about self-presentation. The difficult task has been to organize all of these findings into a coherent framework. If we step back and take a broad view of the entire research literature, we can see that most studies of self-presentation deal with one of four topics.

First, some research is designed simply to demonstrate that a particular behavior is affected by people's concerns with others' impressions. Virtually any behavior can be used for self-presentational purposes, and much research has documented the variety of self-presentational tactics that people use. Thus, to begin, we take a look in Chapter 2 at the wide array of tactics that people use to convey impressions of themselves to other people. You are likely to be surprised by how much of your behavior seems designed for public consumption.

A second body of research has investigated factors that motivate self-presentational behaviors. The degree to which people manage their impressions differs across situations and time. Chapter 3 will focus on the question of *why* people manage their impressions. As it turns out, there is more than one answer to this question, which we'll address from a number of perspectives, including evolution.

The third and largest body of self-presentational research has dealt with factors that affect the kinds of impressions people try to make on others. Chapters 4 through 8 will examine five primary sets of factors that affect the images people try to convey of themselves. People's self-presentations are affected by the norms of the immediate situation and the roles they play in social life (Chapter 4), the values of the targets they want to impress (Chapter 5), their current social image in other people's eyes (Chapter 6), the instrumental usefulness of the impression (Chapter 7), and aspects of their private selves (Chapter 8).

A fourth body of research has dealt with the emotional and behavioral consequences that occur when people begin to worry about the impressions others are forming of them. Not only do self-presentational concerns result in aversive emotions, but people tend to behave differently when they're worried about how they're coming across than when they are confident about their self-presentations. The book concludes in Chapter 9 with a look at how people respond when they become particularly worried about their impressions.

Summary

Self-presentation (or impression management) refers to the process of controlling how one is perceived by other people. Although some people seem to regard concerns with others' impressions as a sign of vanity, manipulativeness, or insecurity, self-presentation is an essential and unavoidable aspect of everyday interaction. People's outcomes in life depend heavily on how they are perceived and evaluated by other people. As a result, they often monitor and regulate the impressions others have of them. Most of the time, the images people present of themselves are reasonably accurate, although they tend to tactically select the kinds of information they will reveal about themselves. Because people tend to be rewarded for making "good" impressions, they usually present favorable images of themselves. However, when they think undesirable images will help them obtain their goals, people sometimes foster unflattering impressions.

The scientific study of self-presentation began with the work of sociologist Erving Goffman, followed shortly afterward by social psychologist Edward Jones. The study of self-presentation was initially viewed as a topic of secondary importance in social psychology, but interest in the topic has increased notably in recent years.

Successful self-presentation requires that people accurately assess the impact of their behavior on others' impressions of them, but people do not always know the kinds of impressions they convey. Not only may their behavior lead to unexpected secondary impressions, but they sometimes have trouble determining how specific other people perceive them.

Self-presentational behaviors are a function of both the person and the situation. The kinds of impressions people try to convey are guided by the individual's motives and personality, as well as by the immediate social setting.