

Chapter 4

Self-Presentation Theory: Self-Construction and Audience Pleasing

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General Principles

Self-presentation is behavior that attempts to convey some information about oneself or some image of oneself to other people. It denotes a class of *motivations* in human behavior. These motivations are in part stable dispositions of individuals but they depend on situational factors to elicit them. Specifically, self-presentational motivations are activated by the evaluative presence of other people and by others' (even potential) knowledge of one's behavior.

Two types of self-presentational motivations can be distinguished (Baumeister, 1982a). One (pleasing the audience) is to match one's self-presentation to the audience's expectations and preferences. The other (self-construction) is to match one's self-presentation to one's own ideal self.

The expression of the audience-pleasing motive varies across situations, especially since different audiences have different preferences; one presents oneself differently when attending church with one's parents than when attending a party with one's sorority or fraternity mates. The audience-pleasing motives can even produce inconsistent or contradictory self-presentations with different audiences. Additionally, audience-pleasing self-presentational motivations vary in strength as a function of the audience's power and importance, particularly with regard to how much the self-presenter is dependent on the audience.

The self-construction motive is presumably a fairly stable disposition and therefore it should lead to self-presentations that are essentially consistent across different situations and different audiences. The strength of the self-construction motive may vary as a function of the desire to claim a certain trait and with uncertainty about whether one has it.

Important refinements of the audience-pleasing concept were introduced by Jones and Pittman (1982). These authors pointed out that self-presentation can be geared toward the audience yet not toward making a favorable

impression. Instead of pleasing the audience, someone may desire to present himself or herself as dangerous (strategy of intimidation), as morally virtuous (strategy of exemplification), or as helpless and needy (strategy of supplication). The general principle behind all these self-presentations, then, is that people present themselves so as to create a particular and useful impression on the audience, in order to influence or manipulate the audience to benefit the self-presenter. Often this is accomplished by impressing the audience as likable and competent; but sometimes it can be most useful to appear dangerous or helpless.

Some further general principles regarding self-presentation were articulated by Hogan (1982). He notes that self-presentation is structured both by the immediate peer group and by the larger, partly internalized reference group, and individuals vary in whether their main orientation is toward the peer group or the reference group. He says that the images of self that guide self-presentation can sometimes be *defensive*—that is, self-presentation can be a matter of *denying* some image of self rather than claiming it. He emphasizes that the entire process of self-presentation gradually becomes overlearned, automatic, and hence unconscious. Lastly, he says self-presentational motivations and skills derive from and two fundamental needs of human social life, namely the needs for status and for popularity.

Operation of the Theory in Group Contexts

Self-presentational motivations are produced by the presence of other people, who represent a potential audience. Thus, group settings by definition raise self-presentational motivations, although to various degrees and in various ways. The main contribution of self-presentation theory to understanding group processes is to raise and answer the following question: How is the behavior of each group member determined by his or her concern with how he or she is perceived by the other group members? A second issue is plausible but has received negligible research attention. That issue is how groups present themselves to other groups. This topic encompasses everything from the public relations effort of giant corporations to a married couple's public misrepresentation of their level of mutual contentment. As we said, though, research has focused so far on the self-presentational dynamics of individuals, and that is what we shall emphasize here.

Why should individuals care about how other members of the group regard them? There are several reasons. First, human social interactions are structured and shaped by mutual interpersonal evaluations, and so group members are affected by these evaluations as long as the group continues to exist and to meet. In simple terms, it is difficult and unpleasant to continue to meet with someone who regards you as asinine, incompetent, or obnoxious. Second, groups may control rewards and punishments for their