forming impressions of others

managing impressions

mismanaging impressions: spoiled identities

on Christmas Day, 1981, I met my soon-to-be wife’s family for the first time. For this group of important strangers, I knew I had to be on my best behavior and say and do all the right things. I wanted to make sure the impression they formed of me was that of a likable fellow whom they’d be proud to call a member of the family someday.

As people busily opened their presents, I noticed the wide and gleeful eyes of my wife’s 14-year-old sister as she unwrapped what was to her a special gift—her very own basketball. Being the youngest in a family of eight kids, she didn’t have much she could call her own, so this was a significant moment for her. She had finally broken away from a life filled with hand-me-downs and communal equipment. She hugged that ball as if it were a puppy.

I saw my chance to make the perfect first impression. “I’m not a bad basketball player,” I thought to myself. “I’ll take her outside to the basketball hoop in the driveway, dazzle her with my shooting skills, become her idol, and win family approval.”

“Hey, Mary,” I said, “let’s go out and shoot some hoops.” After we stepped outside, I grabbed the new ball from her. “Watch this,” I said as I flung it toward the basket from about 40 feet away. We both
watched as the ball arced gracefully toward its destination, and for a brief moment, I actually thought it was going to go in. But that was not to be.

As if guided by the taunting hand of fate, the ball struck an exposed bolt that protruded from the supporting pole of the hoop. There was a sickeningly loud pop, followed by a hissing sound as the ball fluttered to the ground like a deflated balloon. It sat there lifeless, never having experienced the joy of “swishing” through a net. For that matter, it had never even been bounced on the ground in its short-lived inflated state.

For a few seconds, we both stood numb and motionless. Then I turned to apologize to the 14-year-old girl, whose once cheerful eyes now harbored the kind of hate and resentment usually reserved for ax murderers and IRS auditors. In a flash, she burst into tears and ran into the house shrieking, “That guy popped my ball!” It was hardly the heroic identity I was striving for. As the angry mob poured into the backyard to stare at the villainous and still somewhat unknown perpetrator, I became painfully aware of the fragile nature of the self-images we try to project to others.

We all have been in situations—a first date, a job interview, a first meeting with a girlfriend or boyfriend’s family—in which we feel compelled to “make a good impression.” We try to present a favorable image of ourselves so that others will form positive judgments of us. This phenomenon is not only an important and universal aspect of our personal lives but a key element of social structure as well.

In this chapter, I examine the social creation of images. How do we form impressions of others? What do we do to control the impressions others form of us? I also discuss the broader sociological applications of these actions. What are the institutional motivations behind individuals’ attempts to control others’ impressions of them? How do groups and organizations present and manage collective impressions? Finally, what happens when these attempts fail and images are spoiled, as mine was when my errant jump shot killed a girl’s brand-new basketball?

FORMING IMPRESSIONS OF OTHERS

When we first meet someone, we form an immediate impression based on observable cues such as age, ascribed status characteristics such as race and gender, individual attributes such as physical appearance, and verbal and nonverbal expressions. This process of impression formation helps us form a quick picture of the other person’s identity.

Keep in mind that the importance of this information—the value attached to a certain age, race, or gender; the particular physical or personality traits a society defines as desirable; the meaning of certain words and gestures—varies across time and place. Hence, the impressions that people form of others must always be understood within the appropriate cultural and historical contexts. For instance, an emotionally expressive person in the United States may give the impression of being energetic and outgoing; in the United Kingdom such a person may seem boorish and rude; and in Thailand or Japan that person may be considered dangerous or crazy.

Social Group Membership

Age, sex, race, and to a certain degree ethnicity can often be determined merely by looking at someone; social class is less obvious but sometimes becomes known early in an encounter with another person through her or his language, mannerisms, or dress. Our socialization experiences have taught us to expect that people displaying these signs of social group membership have certain characteristics. For instance, if all you know about a person you’ve not yet met is that she’s 85 years old, you might predict that she has low energy, a poor memory, and a conservative approach to life. Think about your expectations when you learn that a new roommate is from a different region of this country—or, for that matter, from a different country. Of course, such expectations are rarely completely accurate. Nevertheless, we begin social interactions with these culturally defined conceptions of how people from certain social groups are likely to act, what their tastes and preferences might be, and what values and attitudes they are likely to hold.

This information is so pervasive and so quickly processed that we usually notice it only when it isn’t there. If you spend a lot of time texting or tweeting with strangers, you may have noticed how difficult it can be to form a friendship or carry on a discussion when you don’t know whether you are interacting with someone of the same sex or with someone of a different sex or whether the person is much older or much younger than you are. Social group membership provides the necessary backdrop to all encounters between people who have little if any prior knowledge of one another.
Physical Appearance

We confirm or modify early impressions based on social group membership by assessing other characteristics that are easily perceivable, such as a person’s physical appearance (Berndt & Heller, 1986). The way people dress and decorate their bodies communicates their feelings, beliefs, and group identity to others. People’s clothes, jewelry, hairstyles, and so on can also indicate their ethnicity, social class, age, cultural tastes, morality, and political attitudes.

But again, these impressions can be influenced by our cultural background. Physical appearance is enormously important in U.S. culture. Everywhere we turn, it seems, we are encouraged to believe that if our skin isn’t free of blemishes, if we are too short or too tall, if we are over- or underweight, if our hair isn’t stylish, if our clothes don’t reflect the latest fashion trend, we have fallen short of some attractiveness threshold. Although we readily acknowledge that using a person’s physical appearance to form an impression is shallow and unfair, most of us do it anyway.

Research confirms that physical appearance affects our perceptions of others. Attractive men are perceived as more masculine and attractive women more feminine than their less attractive counterparts (Gillen, 1981). We often assume that physically attractive people possess other desirable traits, such as sensitivity, kindness, strength, and sexual responsiveness (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972). Such judgments can sometimes be converted to financial gain. Economists have coined the term “beauty premium” to refer to the advantages attractive people enjoy:

Handsome men earn, on average, 5% more than their less-attractive counterparts (good-looking women earn 4% more); pretty people get more attention from teachers, bosses, and mentors. . . . Fifty seven percent of hiring managers [in a recent survey indicated that] qualified but unattractive candidates are likely to have a harder time landing a job, while more than half advised spending as much time and money on “making sure they look attractive” as on perfecting a résumé. (J. Bennett, 2010, p. 47)

On the flip side, ugliness has always occupied a lowly place on the social landscape. In literature and film, ugliness is usually associated with evil and fear, characterizing all manner of monsters, witches, and villains (Kershaw, 2008). Beyond fictional portrayals, unattractiveness can have serious everyday consequences. For instance, one study found that even in occupations where looks have no bearing on a person’s ability to do his or her job—like computer programming—unattractive workers suffer discrimination (Mobius & Rosenblat, 2006). Many parents these days are becoming less tolerant of any flaw in their children’s appearance. Numerous websites now offer retouching services so that parents can airbrush photos of their children to remove blemishes, crooked teeth, and other facial imperfections (J. Bennett, 2008).

Negative impressions based on appearance can also work their way into the legal system. In 2010, a Florida judge ruled that a defendant in a murder trial was entitled to a $125 cosmetic makeover each day he was in court to hide his offensive tattoos, which included a large swastika on his neck. The defense attorney had successfully argued that his client’s fearsome appearance could prejudice the jury:

There’s no doubt in my mind—without the makeup being used, there’s no way a jury could look at [my client] and judge him fairly. It’s too frightening when you see him with the tattoos. It's a scary picture. (quoted in J. Schwartz, 2010, p. A18)

Physical appearance is still a more salient interpersonal and economic issue for women than for men, even though women have more money, political clout, and legal recognition today than ever. For instance, 61% of hiring managers indicate that it’s advantageous for a woman to “show off her figure” in the workplace (cited in J. Bennett, 2010). An article about a talented, all-female chamber music trio called Eroica stated, “The Eroica Trio not only plays beautiful music, it has also created a marketing sensation for being ‘easy on the eye’” (W. Smith, 2002, p. 4). Hillary Clinton’s unsuccessful 2008 presidential campaign was marked by almost constant media focus on her clothing and hairstyle. Here’s how one columnist described the breathless attention being paid to the attractiveness of some female Republican politicians:

Something pretty creepy has been happening to conservative women lately. There seems to be an insistent, increasingly excitable focus on the supposed hotness of Republican women in the public eye, like Sarah Palin, Michele Bachmann, Michelle Malkin, and Nikki Haley. . . . The sexual references are pervasive: they come from left, right, and center, and range from gushing to highly offensive. (Baird, 2010, p. 37)
It's hard to imagine physical attractiveness being the hub of this kind of attention for male political leaders, not to mention male salespeople or classical musicians. Women around the world routinely cause themselves serious pain and injury as they alter their bodies to conform to cultural definitions of beauty. In China, for example, hundreds of women each year, convinced that being taller would improve their job and marriage prospects, subject themselves to a procedure in which their leg bones are broken, separated, and stretched. Metal pins and screws pull the bones apart a fraction of a millimeter a day, sometimes for close to two years. Many Chinese women have lost the ability to walk from this treatment; others have suffered permanent, disfiguring bone damage (C. S. Smith, 2002). In the United States, a growing number of affluent women undergo potentially dangerous cosmetic foot surgery each year to reduce the size of their toes so that they can fit into today’s fashionable, narrow high-heeled shoes (G. Harris, 2003). In 2010, girls and women began wearing decorative “circle lenses,” brightly colored contact lenses that make eyes appear larger because they cover not just the iris, as ordinary lenses do, but part of the whites as well (Saint Louis, 2010). These lenses, which give wearers a childlike, doe-eyed appearance, are available online without a prescription, much to the chagrin of eye doctors who fear the damage they may cause. A spokesperson for the Food and Drug Administration wrote that consumers risk significant eye injury, even blindness, when they buy contact lenses without a valid prescription.

At the individual level, the emphasis on physical appearance devalues a person's other attributes and accomplishments; at the institutional level, it plays an important role in the nation's economy by sustaining several multibillion-dollar enterprises, including the advertising, fashion, cosmetics, and weight loss industries (Schur, 1984).

Verbal and Nonverbal Expression

Another important piece of information we use in forming impressions of others is what people express to us verbally or nonverbally. Obviously, we form impressions of others based on what they tell us about themselves. But beyond speech, people's movements, postures, and gestures provide cues about their values, attitudes, sentiments, personality, and history (Stone, 1981). Sometimes people use these forms of communication purposely to convey meaning, as when they put on a smile so that others will find them approachable. However, some physical expressions, such as a shaky voice, a flushed face, and trembling hands, are difficult to control. They transmit an impression whether we want to or not.

Most of us are quite proficient at “reading” even the subtest nonverbal messages. We learn early on that a raised eyebrow, a nod of the head, or a slight hand gesture can mean something important in a social encounter. So crucial is this ability in maintaining orderly interactions that some psychologists consider a deficiency in it to be a learning disability akin to severe reading problems (Goleman, 1989).

MANAGING IMPRESSIONS

People form impressions of others and present impressions of themselves at the same time. This ability to influence the impressions others make of us is the defining feature of human interaction. Naturally, we try to create impressions of ourselves that give us advantages—by making us seem attractive or powerful or otherwise worthy of people's attention and esteem. Of course, that's what I was trying to do when I attempted the ill-fated jump shot with my future sister-in-law's new basketball.

The process by which people attempt to present a favorable public image of themselves is called impression management. Erving Goffman (1959), the sociologist most responsible for the scholarly examination of impression management, portrays everyday life as a series of social interactions in which a person is motivated to “sell” a particular image to others. The primary goal of impression management is to project a particular identity that will increase the likelihood of obtaining favorable outcomes from others in particular social situations (E. E. Jones & Pittman, 1982; Stryker, 1980). To do so, we can strategically furnish or conceal information. At times, we may need to advertise, exaggerate, or even fabricate our positive qualities; at other times, we conceal or camouflage behaviors or attributes that we assume others will find unappealing.

The prominent role that social network sites now play in our lives has created new challenges for impression management. Recall our discussion of role taking in Chapter 5. In our “offline” lives, we interact with various people each day: family, acquaintances, coworkers, and friends from different
corners of our lives. Consequently, we have the opportunity to express multiple selves and manage different impressions that suit our different immediate needs. You may not be the same person with your friends as you are with your grandparents. But online—when, say, we're creating a Facebook profile of ourselves—we have one shot at managing the impression we want others to form of us. And it's an impression all our different “friends,” who have come to know us under very different circumstances, will have access to. That's a lot of pressure.

Whether it occurs online or in offline, face-to-face interaction, obtaining favorable outcomes through impression management is usually associated with social approval—that is, with being respected and liked by others. However, different circumstances may require projecting different identities (E. E. Jones & Pittman, 1982). Perhaps you've been in situations where you've tried to appear helpless in order to get someone else to do a task you really didn't want to do, or maybe you've tried to appear mean and fearful to intimidate someone. Perhaps you've “played dumb” to avoid challenging a superior (Gove, Hughes, & Geerkin, 1980). As social beings, we have the ability to tailor our images to fit the requirements of a particular situation.

Goffman argues that impression management is not just used to present false or inflated images of ourselves. Many authentic attributes we possess are not immediately apparent to others; sometimes our actions may be misinterpreted. Imagine yourself taking the final exam in your sociology course. You look up from your paper and make brief eye contact with the instructor. You're not cheating, but you think the instructor may interpret your wandering eyes as an indication of cheating. What do you do? Chances are you will consciously overemphasize your noncheating behavior by acting as though you're deep in thought or by glancing up at the clock to highlight your “law-abiding” image.

Frequently people try to present a favorable image of themselves by altering their physical appearance. Clothing and body adornment can be used to manipulate and manage the impressions others form of us. People can dress to convey the impression that they are worthy of respect or, at the very least, attention (Lauer & Handel, 1977). Businesspeople are acutely aware of and usually conform to a corporate dress code, even if the code is “business casual”; those who dress too casually are not taken seriously. Children often signal their entry into the world of adolescence by wearing the clothing of their peers and refusing to wear the clothing chosen by their parents (Stone, 1981). The purveyors of pop, hip-hop, crunk, heavy metal, lounge, rave, dance/house/techno, goth, and other musical subcultures use clothing and hairstyle as an expression of identity and social rebellion. And as you are well aware, fashion is a significant element of the student subculture on most college campuses (Moffatt, 1989). In short, by what they wear, people tell one another who they are, where they come from, and what they stand for.

Dramaturgy: Actors on a Social Stage

“All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players: / They have their exits and their entrances; / And one man in his time plays many parts,” wrote William Shakespeare in As You Like It. Analyzing social interaction as a series of theatrical performances—what sociologists call dramaturgy—has been a staple of symbolic interactionism for decades. Like Shakespeare, sociologist Erving Goffman (1959) argues that people in everyday life are similar to actors on a stage. The “audience” consists of people who observe the behavior of others, “roles” are the images people are trying to project, and the “script” is the content of their communication with others. The goal is to enact a performance that is believable to a particular audience and that allows us to achieve the goals we desire. Just about every aspect of social life can be examined dramaturgically, from the ritualized greetings of strangers to the everyday dynamics of our family, school, and work lives.

Front Stage and Back Stage

A key structural element of dramaturgy is the distinction between front stage and back stage. In the theater, front stage is where the performance takes place for the audience. In contrast, back stage is where makeup is removed, lines are rehearsed, and performances are rehashed, and where people can fall “out of character.”

In social interaction, front stage is where people maintain the appropriate appearance as they interact with others. For workers in a restaurant, front stage is the dining room where the customers (the audience) are present. Here, the servers (the actors) are
expected to present themselves as upbeat, happy, competent, and courteous. Back stage, however, is the region where people can knowingly violate their impression management performances. In the restaurant, back stage is the kitchen area where the once courteous servers now shout, shove dishes, and even complain about or mock the customers.

As in the theater, the barrier between front and back stage is crucial to successful impression management because it blocks the audience from seeing behavior that would ruin the performance. During a therapy session (front stage), psychiatrists usually appear extremely interested in everything their patients say and show considerable sympathy for their problems. At a dinner party with colleagues or at home with family (back stage), however, they may express total boredom with and disdain for their patients’ disclosures. If patients were to see such back stage behavior, not only would it disrupt the performance, but it would damage the psychiatrist’s professional credibility and reputation as well. One study found that beneath their mask of neutrality, many psychiatrists harbor strong and professionally inappropriate feelings—including hatred, fear, anger, and sexual arousal—toward their patients (cited in Goleman, 1993).

Props

Successful impression management also depends on the control of objects, called props, that convey identity. In the theater, props must be handled deftly for an effective performance. A gun that doesn’t go off when it’s supposed to or a chair that unexpectedly collapses can destroy an entire play. The same is true in social interaction. For instance, college students may make sure their schoolbooks are in clear view and beer bottles disposed of as they prepare for an upcoming visit from their parents. Similarly, someone may spend a great deal of time setting a romantic mood for a dinner date at home—the right music, the right lighting, pictures of former lovers hidden from view, and so on.

Sometimes people use props to create an environment that reinforces some individuals’ authority over others. Note the way props were used to intimidate this professor as he testified before Congress:

And then I was called to the witness stand. Now, the chair is something nobody talks about. It is low and extremely puffy. When you sit in it your butt just keeps sinking, and suddenly the tabletop is up to your chest. The senators peer down at you from above, and the power dynamic is terrifying. (H. Jenkins, 1999, p. 21)

Props needn’t be inanimate objects. To convey to potential clients and investors what they believe will be an air of prestige, money, and crucial global connections, some Chinese companies now “rent” white foreigners to pose as fake employees. The companies hope that the presence of these individuals will help to secure a contract or simply support the company’s claim of being internationally successful. An ad in a Chinese newspaper for a company called Rent-a-Laowai (Chinese for “foreigner”) read: “Occasionally companies want a foreign face to go to meetings and conferences or to go to dinners and lunches and smile at the clients and shake people’s hands” (quoted in Farrar, 2010, p. 1).

Viewing impression management from a dramaturgical perspective reminds us that our everyday actions rarely occur in a social vacuum. Indeed, our behaviors are often structured with an eye toward how they might be perceived by particular “audiences.”

Image Making

In our individualistic, competitive society, appearances can sometimes provide a critically important edge. A person’s desire to maximize prestige, wealth, and power can be the driving force behind a thorough makeover. These efforts are not things a person undertakes on his or her own. Whole industries have evolved that are devoted to making and remaking images for the public eye.

The desire to manage impressions by changing physical appearance motivates some people to do far more than try a new hairstyle, get a tattoo, or buy a new outfit or two. Even in economic hard times, people in the United States are willing to spend huge sums of money to medically alter their looks. According to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons (2011), there were 1.6 million cosmetic surgery procedures and close to 12 million minimally invasive, nonsurgical procedures (such as Botox injections, cellulite treatments, and chemical peels) in the United States in 2010. Ninety-one percent of the patients were women. These figures represent a
77% increase over 2000. The overall cost for these procedures was about $10.2 billion.

The desire to surgically alter one’s appearance is not unique to the United States. In China, the growing cosmetic surgery industry takes in over $2.4 billion a year as people with newfound affluence rush to go under the knife to become renzao meiniu, or “man-made beauties.” The number of Chinese receiving cosmetic plastic surgery doubles each year. The most commonly requested procedure is one designed to make the eyes appear larger and more “Western” (LaFraniere, 2011). In fact, China now hosts an “Artificial Beauty” contest, where people from all over the globe compete to become the world’s most beautiful product of plastic surgery (Ang, 2004).

The growing popularity of cosmetic surgery reflects an alarming level of discontent among people about the way they look. Researchers estimate that 30% to 40% of U.S. adults have concerns about some aspect of their physical appearance (Gorbis & Kholodenko, 2005). And about 2% of the population is so self-conscious about their looks that their lives are constricted in some significant way, from feeling inhibited during lovemaking to becoming homebound or even suicidal. This condition, called “body dysmorphic disorder,” has become more common over the past decade or so (Wartik, 2003). About half of these individuals seek some sort of professional medical intervention, like surgery or dermatological treatment (Gorbis & Kholodenko, 2005).

**Social Influences on Impression Management**

Up to this point, I’ve described impression management and dramaturgy from the viewpoint of individual actors driven by a personal desire to present themselves in the most advantageous light possible. But social group membership may also influence the sorts of images a person tries to present in social interaction. The elements of one’s identity—age, gender, race and ethnicity, religion, social class, occupational status—influence others’ immediate expectations, which can be self-fulfilling. In other words, members of certain social groups may manage impressions somewhat differently than nonmembers because of society’s preconceived notions about them. Race or ethnicity and social status are among the most notable influences on impression management.

**Race and Ethnicity**

In a society where race is a primary source of inequality, people of color often learn that they will be rewarded if they assimilate to “white norms” and hide the elements of their ethnoracial culture. According to Kenji Yoshino (2006), a law professor, the pressure to “act white” means that people of color must suppress the nonwhite aspects of their hairstyle, clothing, and speech. They must also monitor their social activities, participation in ethnic or race-based organizations or political causes, and friendship networks. The comedian Dave Chappelle once said that African Americans must be “bilingual” if they want to make it in this society. In other words, they become adept at identifying situations, like job interviews, where they must eliminate “black” patterns of speech and “speak white” (Chaudhry, 2006).

Such impression management strategies may increase the likelihood of economic benefit, but they are not without social costs. As then-Senator Barack Obama said in a 2004 speech at the Democratic National Convention, “Children [of color] can’t achieve unless we raise their expectations and . . . eradicate the slander that says a black youth with a book is acting white” (quoted in Fryer, 2006, p. 53). People of color who “act white” in some situations but perform a different version of their identity when with others like themselves run the risk of being considered sellouts or tagged as “Oreo cookies,” “bananas,” or “coco-nuts”—that is, black or yellow or brown on the outside and white on the inside—by members of their ethnoracial community (Chaudhry, 2006).

Moreover, it’s only the relatively affluent who have the opportunity to learn how to act white. Others—Pakistani cab drivers, Latina housekeepers, Korean grocery store clerks, to name a few—have no such option. Indeed, living up (or down) to certain ethnoracial stereotypes may be one of the few ways people can participate actively in public life while retaining their own cultural identity. In the past, for example, Native Americans often complained that in interactions with members of other ethnoracial groups, they were expected to “act Indian” by wearing traditional garb or speaking in the stilted manner of media stereotypes. Contemporary rap and hip-hop stars are often criticized for conforming to unflattering black
stereotypes in order to appeal to white, middle-class audiences. But while individuals from disadvantaged groups may appear to fit common racial or ethnic stereotypes in public (front stage), an analysis of private (back stage) behavior often indicates that they are keenly aware of the identities they’ve been forced to present.

Social Status
A person’s relative position in society can also influence impression management. Some working-class youths, frustrated by their lack of access to the middle-class world and their inability to meet the requirements of “respectability” as defined by the dominant culture, may present themselves as malicious or dangerous. A tough image helps them gain attention or achieve status and respect within their group (A. Campbell, 1987; A. K. Cohen, 1955).

Conversely, those who occupy the dominant classes of society can get the attention and respect we all want with very little effort (Derber, 1979). They get special consideration in restaurants, shops, and other public settings. They monopolize the starring roles in politics and economics and also claim more than their share of attention in ordinary interactions. By displaying the symbolic props of material success—large homes, tasteful furnishings, luxury cars, expensive clothes and jewelry—people know that they can impress others and thereby reinforce their own sense of worth and status.

Prior to the current economic recession, the visual trappings of social class had become harder to spot. When credit was easily available, more U.S. adults had access to the traditional high-end props of the well-to-do. A middle-class family could own a flat-screen television or a fancy sports car. Just a few years ago, 81% of respondents in one study indicated that they had felt some pressure to buy high-priced goods (cited in Steinhauer, 2005). So the extremely wealthy ratcheted up the visual display of social status, buying even more expensive products, such as $130,000 cars and $400 bottles of wine, and using posh services like personal chefs and private jets. Tough times, however, have led even the super rich to become a bit more discreet in their public displays of wealth: “Out are private jets, glitzy high-profile parties and see-and-be-seen vacations to hot spots such as St. Barts. In are flying first-class, tasteful low-profile affairs and getaways to more remote resorts in the likes of Laos and Panama” (Gomstyn, 2009, p. 1).

Status differences in impression management permeate the world of work as well. Those at the very top of an organization need not advertise their high status because it is already known to the people with whom they interact regularly. Their occupational status is a permanently recognized “badge of ability” (Derber, 1979, p. 83). Others, however, must consciously solicit the attention to which they feel they are entitled. For example, physicians in hospitals may wear stethoscopes and white lab coats to communicate their high-status identity to patients; female doctors are especially inclined to wear the white coats so they will not be mistaken for nurses. These status markers become especially powerful when compared with patients, who are often required to shed their own clothes and don revealing hospital-issue garments. It’s hard to appear powerful and be taken seriously in a conversation with a doctor when you’re barefoot and naked under a paper gown (Franklin, 2006).

Impression management plays a prominent role in the socialization process within many professions (Hochschild, 1983). Managers and CEOs in large companies, for instance, become acutely aware through their rise up the corporate ladder of the image they must exude through their dress and demeanor. Salespeople are trained to present themselves as knowledgeable, trustworthy, and, above all, honest. Medical students learn how to manage their emotions in front of patients and to present the image of “competent physicians.” New teachers learn what images are most effective in getting students to comply. This teacher’s assessment of the importance of impression management more than 50 years ago still rings true today:

You can’t ever let them get the upper hand on you or you’re through. So I start out tough. The first day I get a new class in, I let them know who’s boss. . . . You’ve got to start off tough, then you can ease up as you go along. If you start out easygoing, when you try to be tough, they’ll just look at you and laugh. (E. Goffman, 1959, p. 12)

In any given interaction, one person is likely to have more power than others (Wrong, 1988). When we first hear the word power, we think of it in terms
of orders, threats, and coercion. But noncoercive forms of power—the signs and symbols of dominance, the subtle messages of threat, the gestures of submission—are much more common to impression management in social encounters (Henley, 1977). The humiliation of being powerless is felt by people who are ignored or interrupted, are intimidated by another’s presence, are afraid to approach or touch a superior, or have their privacy freely invaded by another.

The norms that govern the way people address each other also reflect underlying power differences. For instance, the conversations that take place between friends or siblings are commonly marked by the mutual use of informal terms such as first names or nicknames. When status is unequal, though, the lower-status person is often required to use terms of respect such as Sir or Ma’am or Doctor. In the South in years past, every white person had the privilege of addressing any black person by first name and receiving the respectful form of address in return. A president’s fondness for making up funny nicknames for people on his staff or members of Congress may appear amiable and friendly, but it also reinforces power differences. These people are still required to address him as “Mr. President.”

**MISMANAGING IMPRESSIONS: SPOILED IDENTITIES**

While impression management is universal, it’s not always successful. We may mishandle props, blow our lines, mistakenly allow the audience back stage, or otherwise destroy the credibility of our performances. Some of us manage to recover from ineffective impression management quite quickly; others suffer an extended devaluation of their identities. What happens when impression management is unsuccessful? What do we do to regain identities and restore social order?

**Embarrassment**

A common emotional reaction to impression mismanagement is *embarrassment*, the spontaneous feeling we experience when the identity we are presenting is suddenly and unexpectedly discredited in front of others (E. Gross & Stone, 1964). An adolescent boy trying to look “cool” in front of his friends may have his tough image shattered by the unexpected arrival of his mother in the family minivan. We can see his embarrassment in the fixed smile, the nervous hollow laugh, the busy hands, and the downward glance that hides his eyes from the gaze of others (E. Goffman, 1967). Embarrassment can come from a multitude of sources: lack of poise (e.g., stumbling, saying something stupid, spilling a drink, inappropriately exposing body parts), intrusion into the private settings of others (a man walking into a women’s restroom), improper dress for a particular social occasion, and so on.

Embarrassment is sociologically important because it has the potential to destroy the orderliness of a social situation. Imagine being at your high school graduation. As the class valedictorian is giving the commencement address, a gust of wind blows her note cards off the podium. As she reaches down to collect them, she hits her head on the microphone and tears her gown. In front of hundreds of people she stands there, flustered, not knowing what to say or do. The situation would be uncomfortable and embarrassing not only for her but for you and the rest of the audience as well.

Because embarrassment is disruptive for all concerned, it is in everyone’s best interest to cooperate in reducing or eliminating it. To call attention to such an act may be as embarrassing as the original episode itself, so we may pretend not to notice the faux pas (Lindesmith, Strauss, & Denzin, 1991). By suppressing signs of recognition, we make it easier for the person to regain composure (E. Goffman, 1967). A mutual commitment to supporting others’ social identities, even when those identities are in danger, is a fundamental norm of social interaction.

At times, however, embarrassment is used strategically to disrupt another person’s impression management. Practical jokes, for instance, are intentional attempts to rein in conceit or overconfidence and cause someone to lose identity. More seriously, groups and organizations may use embarrassment or the threat of embarrassment (e.g., hazing) to encourage a preferred activity or discourage behavior that may be damaging to the group. In that sense, embarrassment reasserts the power structure of the group, because only certain people can legitimately embarrass others. A low-status employee, for instance, has much less freedom to embarrass a superior or make him or her the target of a joke than vice versa (Coser, 1960).

Groups and organizations themselves may also experience embarrassment from time to time. In 2010, British Petroleum (BP) faced a massive public image
crisis when a deepwater oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico exploded, creating a catastrophic oil spill that devastated the local economy. As if the accident weren’t bad enough, Tony Hayward, chief executive officer of BP, and Carl-Henric Svanberg, its chairman, embarrassed the company further when they made insensitive public comments belittling the disaster, shirking responsibility for it, and trivializing the suffering of the Gulf Coast residents affected by it.

In a collectivist culture like Japan, organizational misdeeds or mistakes can create considerable public humiliation, shame, and embarrassment for top officials. In 2010, Toyota faced worldwide condemnation and was forced to recall some 8 million vehicles when it could no longer deny published reports of fatal accidents in which accelerator pedals had gotten stuck at high speeds. A year later, some officials in Japanese government agencies were forced to resign for trying to downplay the public health crisis that occurred after a nuclear reactor sustained major damage from the earthquake and tsunami.

When events challenge an organization’s public image, leaders are often compelled to engage in activities that protect, repair, and enhance that image (Ginzel, Kramer, & Sutton, 2004). Most government agencies and large corporations like BP and Toyota have massive public relations departments or crisis management teams that carefully oversee the organization’s image by controlling negative publicity. One insurance company offers a corporate liability policy that pays policyholders up to $50,000 for the emergency hiring of an image consultant to help manage embarrassing public relations disasters (Landler, 1996). Southwest Airlines has a full-time employee, called “Senior Manager of Proactive Customer Communications,” whose only job is to write apology letters to customers who are annoyed about flight delays, cancellations, or shoddy plane conditions. He writes about 20,000 such letters a year (J. Bailey, 2007).

Remedies for Spoiled Identities

Organizations and governments can enlist the aid of experts to overcome the debilitating effects of negative images, but individuals are usually left to their own devices. Fixing a spoiled identity is not easy. The mere knowledge that we are being evaluated negatively can impede our thoughts, speech, and action. Nevertheless, the major responsibility for restoring order lies with the person whose actions disrupted things in the first place.

To restore social order and overcome a spoiled identity, the transgressor will use an aligning action (Stokes & Hewitt, 1976). Sometimes aligning can be done easily and quickly. If you step on a person’s foot while standing in line at a cafeteria, a simple apology may be all that’s needed to avoid the impression that you’re a clumsy oaf.

By apologizing, you acknowledge that such an act is wrong and send the message that you are not ordinarily a breaker of such social norms. Other situations, however, call for more detailed repair:

- An **account** is a verbal statement designed to explain unanticipated, embarrassing, or unacceptable behavior (C. W. Mills, 1940; M. Scott & Lyman, 1968). For example, an individual may cite events beyond her or his control (“I was late for the wedding because there was a lot of traffic on the highway”) or blame others (“I spilled my milk because somebody pushed me”). An alternative is to define the offending behavior as appropriate under the circumstances, perhaps by denying that anyone was hurt by the act (“Yeah, I stole the car, but no one got hurt”), by claiming that the victim deserved to be victimized (“I beat him up, but he had it coming”), or by claiming higher, unselfish motives (“I stole food, but I did it to feed my family”).

- A **disclaimer** is a verbal assertion given before the fact to forestall any complaints or negative implications (Hewitt & Stokes, 1975). If we think something we’re about to do or say will threaten our identity or be used by others to judge us negatively, we may use a disclaimer. Phrases such as “I probably don’t know what I’m talking about, but . . .” or “I’m not a racist, but . . .” introduce acts or expressions that ordinarily might be considered undesirable. As long as a disclaimer is provided, a self-proclaimed nonexpert can pretend to be an expert and a person claiming to be nonracist feels he or she can go ahead and make a racist statement.

Accounts and disclaimers are important links between the individual and society. We use them to explicitly define the relationship between our questionable conduct and prevailing cultural norms. That is, by using aligning actions, we publicly reaffirm our commitment to the social order that our conduct has violated and thereby defend the sanctity of our social identities and the “goodness” of society.
Other people may also try to deal with a transgressor’s spoiled identity through a process called *cooling out* (E. Goffman, 1952): gently persuading someone who has lost face to accept a less desirable but still reasonable alternative identity. People engaged in cooling out seek to persuade rather than force offenders to change. It’s an attempt to minimize distress. The challenge is to keep the offender from realizing that he or she is being persuaded.

Cooling out is a common element of social life; it is one of the major functions of consumer complaint departments, coaches, doctors, and priests. Cooling out also plays a major part in informal relationships. A partner who terminates a dating or courting relationship might persuade the other person to remain a “good friend,” gently pushing the person into a lesser role without completely destroying her or his self-worth.

**Stigma**

The permanent spoiling of someone’s identity is called *stigma*. A stigma is a deeply discrediting characteristic, widely viewed as an insurmountable obstacle preventing competent or morally trustworthy behavior (E. Goffman, 1963). Stigmas spoil the identities of individuals regardless of other attributes those individuals might have. According to Goffman, the three types of stigma are (1) defects of the body (e.g., severe scars, blindness, paralyzed or missing limbs), (2) defects of character (e.g., dishonesty, a weak will, a history of imprisonment or substance abuse), and (3) membership in devalued social groups, such as certain races, religions, or ethnicities. The impression management task when faced with stigma is not so much to recapture a tarnished identity as to minimize its social damage.

Some stigmas are worse than others. For instance, the use of eyeglasses to compensate for one sensory deficiency (poor vision) is usually considered far less stigmatizing than the use of hearing aids to compensate for a different sensory deficiency (poor hearing). Contemporary hearing aids are designed to be as small and unnoticeable as possible. Eyeglasses, on the other hand, have become a common fashion accessory, often sold in their own trendy boutiques.

Stigma varies across time and culture as well. Being a Christian in the 21st century is very different from being one in the Arab Middle East (Ainlay, Becker, & Coleman, 1986). Ancient Mayans considered being cross-eyed desirable, so parents encouraged babies to focus on objects that forced their eyes to cross (Link & Phelan, 2001). Obesity is stigmatized in contemporary Western societies but was seen as desirable, attractive, and symbolic of status and wealth in the past (Clinard & Meier, 1979) and is still seen that way in some other cultures today.

Interactions between the stigmatized and the nonstigmatized—called “mixed contacts” can sometimes be uneasy. We have all felt uncomfortable with people who are “different” in appearance or behavior. Stigma initiates a judgment process that colors impressions and sets up barriers to interaction (E. E. Jones et al., 1984).

Whether intentionally or not, nonstigmatized individuals often pressure stigmatized people to conform to “inferior” identities. A person in a wheelchair who is discouraged from going camping or a blind person who is discouraged from living on her or his own is not given the chance to develop important skills and is thus kept dependent.

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Nonstigmatized people often avoid mixed contacts because they anticipate discomfort and are unsure how to act (E. Goffman, 1963). Research shows that when interacting with a person who is physically disabled, an able-bodied person is likely to be more inhibited and more rigid and to end the interaction sooner than if the other person were also able bodied (Kleck, 1968; Kleck, Ono, & Hastorf, 1966). On the one hand, the able-bodied person may fear that showing direct sympathy or interest in a disabled person’s condition could be regarded as rude or intrusive. On the other hand, ignoring it may make the interaction artificial and awkward or create impossible demands (Michener, DeLamater, & Schwartz, 1986).

As for people with stigmatizing conditions, they often sense that others are evaluating them negatively. One study of people diagnosed with a mental disorder found that they had all at one time or another been shunned, avoided, patronized, or discriminated against when others found out about their condition (Wahl, 1999). Consider also the case of Mark Breimhorst, a Stanford University graduate. Mr. Breimhorst has no hands. When he was applying to business schools in 1998, he was given 25% more time to complete the Graduate Management
Admission Test. His results were mailed to prospective graduate schools with the notation “Scores obtained under special circumstances.” Mr. Breimhorst was not admitted to any of the business schools to which he applied. He filed a federal lawsuit against the testing service, challenging the way they flagged the scores of students who needed accommodations. Such notations, he argued, were stigmatizing because they created suspicion that the scores were less valid than others (Lewin, 2000). In 2003, the testing service stopped flagging the results of students who receive special accommodations.

Faced with the strong possibility of discrimination, people with stigmatizing conditions often use coping strategies to establish the most favorable identity possible. One strategy is to try to hide the stigma. People who are hard of hearing, for instance, may learn to read lips or otherwise interact with people as if they could hear perfectly; those with bodily stigmas may opt for surgery to permanently conceal their condition.

Some stigmatized individuals, particularly those whose conditions are not immediately observable, use a strategy of selective disclosure. Sociologist Charlene E. Miall (1989) interviewed and surveyed 70 infertile women, nearly all of whom characterized infertility as something negative, an indication of failure, or an inability to function “normally.” Most of the women were concerned that others’ knowledge of their infertility would be stigmatizing. So they engaged in some form of information control. Many simply concealed the information from everyone except medical personnel and infertility counselors. Others used medical accounts, saying, “It’s beyond my control.” Some disclosed the information only to people they felt would not think ill of them. Some even used the disclosure of their infertility to gain control of a situation by deliberately shocking their “normal” audience (Miall, 1989).

Of course, not all stigmas can be hidden. Some individuals can only minimize the degree to which their stigmas intrude on and disrupt the interaction. One tactic is to use self-deprecating humor—telling little jokes about their shortcomings—to relieve the tension felt by the nonstigmatized. Others may try to focus on attributes unrelated to the stigma. For instance, a person in a wheelchair may carry around esoteric books in a conspicuous manner to show others that he or she still has a brain that works well. Still others with stigmas boldly call attention to their condition by mastering areas thought to be closed to them (such as mountain climbing for an amputee).

And some organize a movement to counter social oppression. For instance, organizations like the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance and the Council on Size and Weight Discrimination help fat people (fat is their preferred adjective, by the way) cope with a society that hates their size by lobbying Congress and state legislatures to combat “size discrimination” and promote “weight diversity” (Saulny, 2009a). They have organized civil rights protests in Washington, D.C., lobbied health care professionals for tolerance and acceptance, and organized campaigns against insurance discrimination and the dubious “science” of weight loss programs (LeBesco, 2004).

But overcoming the problems created by stigma cannot be accomplished solely through individual impression management or collective demonstrations. Long-lasting improvements can be accomplished only by changing cultural beliefs about the nature of stigma (Link, Mirotnik, & Cullen, 1991). As long as we hold stigmatized individuals solely responsible for dealing with the stigma, only some of them will be able to overcome the social limitations of their condition.

CONCLUSION

After reading this chapter, you may have an image of human beings as cunning, manipulative, and cynical play actors whose lives are merely a string of phony performances carefully designed to fit the selfish needs of the moment. The impression manager comes across as someone who consciously and fraudulently presents an inaccurate image in order to take advantage of a particular situation. Even the person who seems not to care about her or his appearance may be consciously cultivating the image of “not caring.”

There’s no denying that people consciously manufacture images of themselves that allow them to achieve some desired goal. Most of us go through life trying to create the impression that we’re attractive, honest, competent, and sincere. To that end we carefully manage our appearance, present qualities we think others will admire, and hide qualities we think they won’t. When caught in an act that may threaten the impression we’re trying to foster, we strategically use statements that disclaim, excuse, or justify it.
So who is the real you? If people freely change their images to suit the expectations of a given audience, is there something more stable that characterizes them across all situations?

If you are aware that the impression you are managing is not the real you, then you must have some knowledge of what is the real you. And what you are may, in fact, transcend the demands of particular situations. Some basic, pervasive part of your being may allow you to choose from a repertoire of identities the one that best suits the immediate needs of the situation. As you ponder this possibility, realize that your feelings about impression management reflect your beliefs about the nature of individuals and the role society and others play in our everyday lives.

**CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS**

◆ A significant portion of social life is influenced by the images we form of others and the images others form of us.

◆ Impression formation is based initially on our assessment of ascribed social group membership (race, age, gender, etc.), individual physical appearance, and verbal and nonverbal messages.

◆ While we are gathering information about others to form impressions of them, we are fully aware that they are doing the same thing. Impression management is the process by which we attempt to control and manipulate information about ourselves to influence the impressions others form of us. Impression management can be both individual and collective.

◆ Impression mismanagement can lead to the creation of damaged identities, which must be repaired in order to sustain social interaction.

**KEY TERMS**

**account:** Statement designed to explain unanticipated, embarrassing, or unacceptable behavior after the behavior has occurred

**aligning action:** Action taken to restore an identity that has been damaged

**back stage:** Area of social interaction away from the view of an audience, where people can rehearse and rehash their behavior

**cooling out:** Gently persuading someone who has lost face to accept a less desirable but still reasonable alternative identity

**disclaimer:** Assertion designed to forestall any complaints or negative reactions to a behavior or statement that is about to occur

**dramaturgy:** Study of social interaction as theater, in which people (“actors”) project images (“play roles”) in front of others (“the audience”)

**embarrassment:** Spontaneous feeling experienced when the identity someone is presenting is suddenly and unexpectedly discredited in front of others

**front stage:** Area of social interaction where people perform and work to maintain appropriate impressions

**impression formation:** The process by which we define others based on observable cues such as age, ascribed status characteristics such as race and gender, individual attributes such as physical appearance, and verbal and nonverbal expressions

**impression management:** Act of presenting a favorable public image of oneself so that others will form positive judgments

**stigma:** Deeply discrediting characteristic that is viewed as an obstacle to competent or morally trustworthy behavior