

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, DC, lobbied health care professionals for tolerance and acceptance, publicly condemned weight-loss TV shows like *The Biggest Loser* for bullying overweight contestants, and organized campaigns against insurance discrimination and the dubious “science” of weight loss programs (LeBesco, 2004; National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance, 2013).

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, Mirotznik, & 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.

YOUR TURN

Impression management is a tool most of us use to present ourselves as likable people. Occasionally, however, our attempts fail. Survey several friends or classmates and have them describe their most embarrassing moment. Prompt them for specific details: What were

the circumstances surrounding the incident? What identities were they trying to present at the time? How did their attempt to claim these identities fail? How did these people immediately react, physically and behaviorally, to the embarrassment? How did they try to overcome

the embarrassment and return order? Did they offer some sort of account? Were the consequences of the failed impression management temporary or permanent? What did the witnesses to the embarrassing incident do? Did their reactions alleviate or intensify the embarrassment your respondents felt?

Once you've gathered a substantial number of stories (about 10 or 15), see if you can find some common themes. What are the most frequent types of embarrassing situations? What are the most frequent reactions? If your class is large, your instructor can have you report your results to a small group of fellow students or to

the entire class. What kinds of patterns can you identify in the embarrassing stories people tell? Are there gender, ethnic, or age differences in what people find embarrassing?

Sociologists Edward Gross and Gregory Stone have written, "In the wreckage left by embarrassment lie the broken foundations of social transactions" (1964, p. 2). What do you suppose they meant by that? Use your results to discuss the sociological importance of embarrassment (and, more important, reactions to embarrassment) in terms of the maintenance of interactional and social order.

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

performance team: Set of individuals who cooperate in staging a performance that leads an audience to form an impression of one or all team members

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

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