3

Interpersonal Communication and the Self

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

3.1 Describe how the self-concept is subjective and is shaped by, and consequently affects, communication with others.

3.2 Explain how we manage impressions in person and online to enhance our presenting image.

3.3 Identify an optimal level of self-disclosure and non-disclosure in effective relationships.

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CHAPTER OUTLINE

WHO ARE YOU? Before reading on, take a few minutes to try a simple exercise. First, make a list of the 10 words or phrases that describe the most important features of who you are. Some may be social roles (student, son or daughter, employee). Some may be physical characteristics (athletic, tall), others intellectual (smart, inquisitive). Perhaps you can best define yourself in terms of moods, feelings, or attitudes (optimistic, critical, energetic). Or you could consider your social characteristics (outgoing, shy, defensive). You may highlight belief systems (pacifist, Christian, vegetarian, libertarian). Maybe your work is an important part of who you are (barista, teacher, blogger). Finally, you could focus on particular skills (swimmer, artist, chess player). In any case, choose 10 words or phrases that best describe you and write them down. Next, reorder your list, ranking the 10 items from most to least fundamental to your identity.

COMMUNICATION AND THE SELF-CONCEPT

The list you created in this exercise offers clues about your **self-concept**: the relatively stable set of perceptions you hold of yourself. Imagine a mirror that reflected not only your appearance but other aspects of who you are—your typical emotional states, special talents, likes, dislikes, values, roles, and so on. That reflection would be your self-concept.

Note that any description you constructed in this exercise is only a partial one. To make it even close to complete, you'd have to add hundreds of words. Of course, not every dimension of your self-concept list is equally important, and the types of descriptions that are most important vary from person to person. For example, the most significant part of one person's self-concept might consist of social roles, whereas for another it might be physical appearance, health, friendships, accomplishments, or skills.

Self-esteem is the part of the self-concept that involves evaluations of self-worth. Your self-concept might include being quiet, argumentative, or serious. How you *feel* about these qualities determines your self-esteem.

Self-esteem evaluations begin at a young age (Cvencek et al., 2016) and have a powerful, cyclical effect on communication behavior, as Figure 3.1 shows. People who feel good about themselves have positive expectations about how they will communicate (Baldwin & Keelan, 1999). These feelings increase the chance that communication will be successful, and successes contribute to positive self-evaluations, which reinforce self-esteem. Of course, the same principle can work in a negative cycle when communicators have low self-esteem. One study found that people with low self-esteem don't fare well on social networking sites (Forest & Wood, 2012): They tend to post more negative information, and people are less likely to respond to downbeat messages. What could be a tool for connecting with others can thus perpetuate low self-esteem.

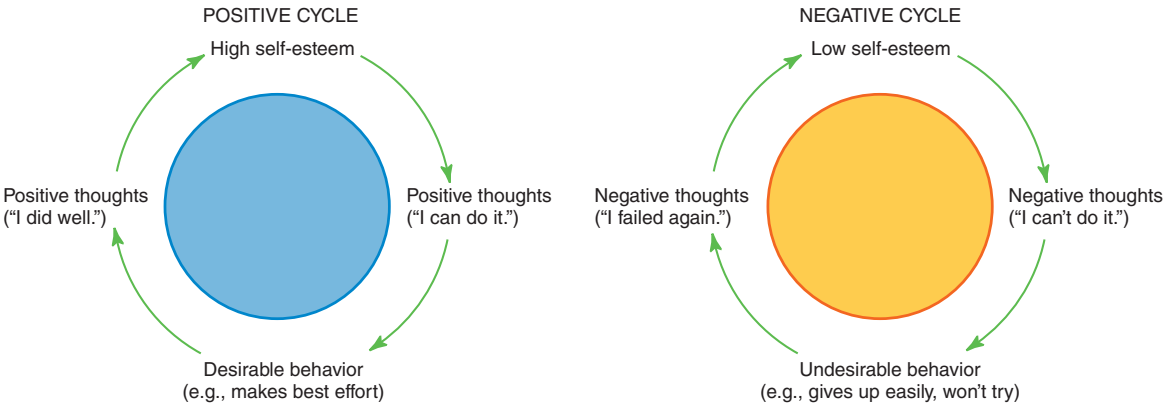


FIGURE 3.1 The Relationship Between Self-Esteem and Communication Behavior

Adapted from Johnson, 1998.

Although high self-esteem has obvious benefits, it doesn't guarantee interpersonal success. People with high self-esteem may *think* they make better impressions on others and have better friendships and romantic lives, but neither impartial observers nor objective tests verify these beliefs (Baumeister et al., 2003). It's easy to see how people with an inflated sense of self-worth could irritate others by coming across as condescending know-it-alls. Moreover, people with low self-esteem have the potential to change their self-appraisals. The point here is that positive self-evaluations can often be the starting point for positive communication with others.

HOW THE SELF-CONCEPT DEVELOPS

Researchers generally agree that self-concept does not exist at birth (Rochat, 2001). At about 6 or 7 months of age, infants begin to recognize "self" as distinct from surroundings. If you've ever watched children at this age, you've probably marveled at how they can stare with great fascination at their own foot or hand, almost as if these were strange objects belonging to someone else. Then the connection is made: "The foot is me," "The hand is me." These first revelations form the child's earliest concept of self.

As the child develops, this rudimentary sense of identity expands into a much more complete and sophisticated picture that resembles the self-concept of adults. This evolution is almost totally a product of social interaction (Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011). Two complementary theories describe how interaction with others shapes the way individuals view themselves: reflected appraisal and social comparison.

Reflected Appraisal

Now try the following exercise. First, recall someone who helped enhance your self-esteem by acting in a way that made you feel accepted, worthwhile, important, appreciated, or loved. For instance, you might recall a childhood teacher who took time to encourage you specifically. Next,

Early messages from significant others can shape the self-concept for a lifetime. ***What messages from your childhood have affected your self-concept and the way you communicate?***

recall someone who acted in either a big or small way to diminish your self-esteem, such as a coach who criticized you in front of the team.

After thinking about these two types of interactions, you should begin to see that everyone's self-concept is to some degree a **reflected appraisal**: a mirroring of others' judgments (Asencio, 2013). To the extent that you have received supportive messages, you have learned to appreciate and value yourself. Receiving critical signals, on the other hand, can make you feel less valuable, lovable, and capable (Lemay & Dudley, 2009). In part, your self-concept is a reflection of the messages you've received throughout your life—both in person and via social media (Wallace & Tice, 2012).

Social scientists use the term **significant other** to describe a person whose evaluations are especially influential (Dehart et al., 2011). Messages from parents, of course, are an early and important influence on the self-concept. Supportive parents are more likely than unsupportive ones to raise children with stable self-concepts and high self-esteem (Sillars et al., 2005). Unfortunately, not all parental messages are positive. For instance, daughters exposed to "fat talk" from their mothers often develop body image issues, sometimes resulting in eating disorders (Arroyo & Andersen, 2016). Along with family, the messages from many other significant others shape our self-concept. Teachers, friends, romantic partners, and even some acquaintances can all leave an imprint on how you view yourself—sometimes for better, sometimes for worse (Rill et al., 2009).

You might argue that not every part of your self-concept is shaped by others. After all, nobody needs to tell you whether you are tall, speak with an accent, have curly hair, and so on. Indeed, some features of the self are immediately apparent. But the *significance* we attach to them—that is, the rank we assign them in the hierarchy of our list and the interpretation we give them—depends greatly on the opinions of others.

Social Comparison

So far, we have looked at the way others' messages shape one's self-concept and self-esteem. In addition to using these messages, we form our self-image by the process of **social comparison**: evaluating ourselves in comparison with others (Strickhouser & Zell, 2015). We decide whether we are superior or inferior (which influences our self-esteem) and similar or different (which influences our self-concept) by comparing ourselves to what social scientists call **reference groups**—others against whom we evaluate our own characteristics (Van De Gaer et al., 2012).

You might feel ordinary or inferior in terms of talent, friendships, or attractiveness if you compare yourself with an inappropriate reference group. For instance, studies have shown that young women who regularly compare themselves with ultra-thin models develop negative appraisals of their own bodies, in some cases leading to eating disorders (Arroyo, 2015; Krcmar et al., 2008). Men, too, who compare themselves to media-idealized male physiques evaluate their bodies negatively (Cho & Lee, 2013).

FOCUS ON RESEARCH

Does Instagram = #Instasad?

Along with its personal and relational benefits, Facebook usage has been linked with lower self-esteem and even depression for some users. A research team led by Katerina Lup wanted to know if the same holds true for Instagram, the photo-sharing network.

In the study, 117 regular users of Instagram (ages 18–29) were asked about their use of the social media tool. They were also given a battery of tests measuring tendencies toward social comparison and depression. The researchers were not surprised to find some connection between Instagram use, negative social comparison, and depressive symptoms.

But there was a twist to these findings: The negative effects were highest for those who followed more strangers on Instagram. For those who mostly followed friends and family, social comparisons were generally positive and depressive symptoms low.

The researchers suggest that we don't feel inferior when comparing ourselves to people we know well because we're not fooled by their glamorous self-portrayals. With strangers, we're more prone to believe they *do* live better lives—and comparisons with them are thus more depressing.

The takeaway? Consider limiting the number of strangers you follow on Instagram and other social media—and remember that their lives aren't as perfect as they may seem.

Lup, K., Trub, L., & Rosenthal, L. (2015). Instagram #instasad?: Exploring associations among Instagram use, depressive symptoms, negative social comparison, and strangers followed. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 18,* 247–252.

People also use others' online profiles as points of comparison, and they may feel less attractive, successful, and happy after doing so (Arroyo & Brunner, 2016). In particular, Facebook comparisons can lead to lowered self-esteem and even depression (Cramer et al., 2016). As you'll read later in this chapter, social networking profiles are an exercise in impression management, and they rarely reflect the warts and bumps of everyday life. But some look at others' Facebook pages and conclude, "They are happier and having better lives than I am" (Chou & Edge, 2012). The Focus on Research sidebar on this page describes how Instagram users can make similar negative comparisons—and how choosing appropriate reference groups can be an antidote to the problem.

To some degree, we're in control of our reference groups. It's possible to seek out people with whom we compare more favorably (Beer & Hughes, 2011). For instance, you might decide that it's foolish to constantly compare your athletic prowess with that of professionals or your looks with those of movie stars. Once you place yourself alongside a truly representative sample, your self-concept may become more realistic.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SELF-CONCEPT

Now that you have a better idea of how your self-concept has developed, we can take a closer look at some of its characteristics.

The Self-Concept Is Subjective

The way we view ourselves may be at odds with others' perceptions—and often with the observable facts. Sometimes we have unrealistically favorable self-appraisals. One study found that online daters often have a

Watch and Discuss

Look up and watch the "Dove Evolution Commercial."

1. Consider how *reflected appraisal* and *social comparison* are at work in this piece.
2. Discuss the role of media models in shaping self-images.

"foggy mirror"—that is, they see themselves more positively than others do (Ellison et al., 2006).

As another example, people are notoriously bad judges of their own communication skills. In one study, there was no relationship between the subjects' self-evaluations as interpersonal communicators, public speakers, or listeners and their observed ability to perform well in any of these areas (Carrell & Willmington, 1996). In another study (Myers, 1980), college students were asked to rank themselves on their ability to get along with others. Defying mathematical laws, all subjects—every last one of more than 800,000—put themselves in the top half of the population. A total of 60 percent rated themselves in the top 10 percent of the population, and an amazing 25 percent believed they were in the top 1 percent. These students had similarly lofty appraisals of their leadership and athletic abilities.

There are also times when we view ourselves more harshly than the facts warrant. We have all experienced a temporary case of the "uglies," convinced we look much worse than others would say we appear. Although everyone suffers occasional bouts of low self-esteem, some people suffer from long-term or even permanent states of excessive self-doubt and criticism (Wood et al., 2009). This chronic condition can of course influence communication with others.

Self-evaluations can be distorted for several reasons:

- *Obsolete information*. The effects of past failures in school or social relations can linger long after they have occurred, even though such events don't predict failure in the future. Likewise, your past successes don't guarantee future success.
- *Distorted feedback*. The remarks of overly critical parents, cruel classmates, uncaring teachers, excessively demanding employers, or even rude strangers can have a lasting effect. Other distorted messages are unrealistically positive. For instance, a child's inflated ego may be based on the praise of doting parents, and a boss's inflated ego may come from the praise of brownnosing subordinates.
- *Perfectionism*. From the time most of us learn to understand language, we are exposed to models who appear to be perfect. The implicit message is "A well-adjusted, successful person has no faults." The naive belief in perfection—either our own or others'—can distort the self-concept.
- *Social expectations*. Curiously, our perfectionist society generally rewards those who downplay their strengths. We usually consider those who show off their strengths to be braggarts or egotists, confusing them with people who boast about accomplishments they do not possess (Miller et al., 1992). This convention leads many people to talk freely about (and dwell on) their shortcomings while downplaying their accomplishments.

A Healthy Self-Concept Is Flexible

People change. Shy children might turn into outgoing adults. Moody teenagers can become upbeat professionals. People also change from context to context. You might be a relaxed conversationalist with people you

know but at a loss for words with strangers. The self-concepts of most communicators react to these changes ("I'm patient at work," "I'm not patient at home"), and these changes affect self-esteem ("I'm not as good a person at home as I am in the office").

Think back to your list of self-descriptions from the exercise at the beginning of the chapter. How many were true of you 5 to 10 years ago? Which do you think will still be true 5 to 10 years from now? It's helpful for communicators to take stock of themselves now and then and acknowledge changes to their self-concept. But that's not always easy, as we'll see.

The Self-Concept Resists Change

To be realistic, a self-concept should reflect the way we change over time, but it often does not. We resist revising it and even seek out people who confirm how we see ourselves. Numerous studies (e.g., Rehman et al., 2009; Stets & Cast, 2007) have shown that both college students and married couples with high self-esteem seek out partners who view them favorably, whereas those with low self-esteem are more inclined to interact with people who view them unfavorably. This tendency to seek confirmation of an existing self-concept, labeled *cognitive conservatism*, appears to hold true for people in a variety of cultures (Church et al., 2012).

We are understandably reluctant to revise a favorable self-perception (DeMarree et al., 2011). If you were a thoughtful, romantic partner early in a relationship, it would be hard to admit that you might have become less considerate and attentive lately. Likewise, if you used to be a serious student, acknowledging that you have slacked off isn't easy.

Curiously, the tendency to cling to an outmoded self-perception holds even when the new image would be more favorable (DeMarree et al., 2010). For example, some of our former students still view themselves as underachievers despite being successful on several measures. Some people have difficulty receiving and believing compliments about who they have become (Kille

Media Clip

Reflecting Years of Appraisal: *This Is Us*

The time-hopping TV series *This Is Us* offers a unique opportunity to witness how interpersonal messages shape self-concepts. Some scenes focus on the parenting of Jack and Rebecca Pearson (Milo Ventimiglia and Mandy Moore) as they raise their children at the end of the 20th century. Other times the series moves to present day, revealing how those children turned out in their late 30s.

In flashback sequences, we see how messages about weight have haunted Kate (Chrissy Metz) most of her life. Randall (Sterling K. Brown) struggles to find his identity as a black child growing up in a white family. And because his siblings seem to get the lion's share of attention, Kevin (Justin Hartley) constantly craves a spotlight of his own. All of these issues carry forward to adulthood—and the Pearson children develop various ways to refine their self-concepts and maintain their self-esteem.

The show demonstrates that while biology plays a role in who a person becomes, messages from significant others also have a profound impact.

et al., 2017). The tragedy of this sort of cognitive conservatism is obvious. People with unnecessarily negative self-esteem can become their own worst enemies, denying themselves the validation they deserve and the need to enjoy satisfying relationships.

If you're in need of a self-concept change, the best prescription is to surround yourself with significant others who offer you accurate, affirming messages about who you are and who you're becoming (Dehart et al., 2011). The shift might occur slowly, but over time you'll likely begin reflecting their appraisals.

THE SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY AND COMMUNICATION

Self-concept is such a powerful influence on the personality that it can affect your future behavior and that of others. A **self-fulfilling prophecy** occurs when a person's expectations of an event, and her or his subsequent behavior based on those expectations, make the outcome more likely to occur (Watzlawick, 2005). As you saw in the discussion surrounding Figure 3.1 on page 71, this circular process involves four stages:

1. Holding an expectation (for yourself or for others)
2. Behaving in accordance with that expectation
3. The expectation coming to pass
4. Reinforcing the original expectation

Let's use a slightly exaggerated example to illustrate the concept. One morning you read your horoscope, which offers the following prediction: "Today you will meet the person of your dreams, and the two of you will live happily ever after." Assuming you believe in horoscopes, what will you do? You'll probably start making plans to go out on the town that night in search of your "dream person." You'll dress up, groom yourself well, and carefully evaluate every person you encounter. You'll also be attentive, charming, witty, polite, and gracious when you end up meeting a good candidate. As a result, that person is likely to be impressed and attracted to you—and lo and behold, the two of you end up living happily ever after. Your conclusion? That horoscope sure had it right!

"I don't sing because I am happy. I am happy because I sing."

On closer examination, the horoscope—which helped create the Stage 1 expectation—really wasn't the key to your success. Although it got the ball rolling, you would still be single if you had stayed home that evening. Stage 2—going out on the town and acting charming—was what led your "dream person" to be attracted to you, bringing about the positive results (Stage 3). While it's tempting to credit the horoscope for the outcome (Stage 4), it's important to realize that *you* were responsible for bringing the prediction to pass—hence the term *self-fulfilling* prophecy.

The horoscope story is of course fictional, but research shows that self-fulfilling prophecies operate in real-life situations. To see how, read on.

Types of Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

There are two types of self-fulfilling prophecies. Self-imposed prophecies occur when your own expectations influence your behavior. You've probably had the experience of waking up in a cross mood and saying to yourself, "This will be a bad day." Once you made such a decision, you may have acted in ways that made it come true (e.g., avoided others, gave curt responses). On the other hand, if you approach the same day with the idea that it could be a good one, you're likely to communicate in ways that will bring good things to pass. For instance, your expectations going into an interpersonal conflict will influence how you behave—and how the conflict turns out (DiPaola et al., 2010).

A second category of self-fulfilling prophecies occurs when one person's expectations govern another's actions. The classic example was demonstrated by Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson in a study they described in their book *Pygmalion in the Classroom* (1968; see also Lee et al., 2015). The experimenters told teachers that 20 percent of the children in a certain elementary school showed unusual potential for intellectual growth. The names of the 20 percent were drawn by means of a table of random numbers—much as if they were drawn out of a hat. Eight months later these children showed significantly greater gains in IQ than did the remaining children, who had not been singled out for the teachers' attention. The change in the teachers' behavior toward these allegedly "special" children led to changes in their intellectual performance. Among other things, the teachers gave the "smart" students more time to answer questions and provided more feedback to them. These children did better not because they were any more intelligent than their classmates, but because their teachers—significant others—communicated the expectation that they could.

Notice that it isn't just the observer's *belief* that creates a self-fulfilling prophecy for the person who is the target of the expectations. The observer must *communicate that belief* verbally or nonverbally for the prediction to have any effect. If parents have faith in their children but the kids aren't aware of that confidence, they won't be affected by their parents' expectations. If a boss has concerns about an employee's ability to do a job but keeps those worries to herself or himself, the employee won't be influenced. In this sense, the self-fulfilling prophecies imposed by one person on another are as much a communication phenomenon as a psychological one.

PRESENTING THE SELF

So far, you've seen how communication shapes the way communicators view *themselves*. Now it's time to turn the tables and focus on the topic of **impression management**—the communication strategies people use to influence how *others* view them (Metts & Grohskopf, 2003). In the following pages, you will see that many of our messages are aimed at creating desired impressions.

The public face we show to the world is often different from the way we view ourselves privately. ***What differences are there between your public and private selves? What aspects of yourself are and aren't appropriate to share with others?***

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SELVES

To understand why impression management exists, it's necessary to discuss the notion of self in more detail. It's a mistake to think of "the self" as if each of us had only one identity. In truth, each of us possesses several selves, some private and others public (Fenigstein, 2009). These selves are often quite different.

The **perceived self** is the person you believe yourself to be in moments of honest self-examination. The perceived self may not be accurate in every respect. For example, you might think you are much more (or less) intelligent than an objective test would measure. Accurate or not, the perceived self is powerful because we believe it reflects who we are. You can call the perceived self "private" because you are unlikely to reveal all of it to another person. For example, you might be reluctant to share some feelings about your appearance ("I think I'm rather unattractive"), your goals ("The most important thing to me is becoming rich"), or your motives ("I care more about myself than about others").

In contrast to the perceived self, the **presenting self** is a public image—the way we want to appear to others. In most cases the presenting self we seek to create is a socially approved image: diligent student, loving partner, conscientious worker, loyal friend, and so on. Sociologist Erving Goffman (1959, 1983) used the word **face** to describe this socially approved identity, and he coined the term **facework** to describe the verbal and nonverbal ways in which we act to maintain our own presenting image and the images of others. Goffman argued that each of us can be viewed as a kind of playwright who creates roles that we want others to believe, as well as the performer who acts out those roles. This "playwriting" starts early in life as children interact with their parents (Gerholm, 2011), and it continues into adulthood in both personal and professional settings.

Goffman (1983) suggested that each of us maintains face by putting on a *front* when we are around others whom we want to impress. In contrast, behavior in the *back region*—when we are alone—may be quite different. You can recognize the difference between front and backstage behavior by recalling a time when you observed a driver, alone in her or his car, behaving in ways that would never be acceptable in public. All of us engage in backstage ways of acting that we would never exhibit in front of others. Just think of how you behave in front of the bathroom mirror when the door is locked, and you will appreciate the difference between public and private behavior. If you knew someone was watching, would you behave differently?

CHARACTERISTICS OF IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

Now that you have a sense of what impression management is, it's time to look at some characteristics of this process.

We Strive to Construct Multiple Identities

It is an oversimplification to suggest we use impression management strategies to create just one identity. In the course of even a single day, most people play a variety of roles: "respectful student," "joking friend," "kind neighbor," and "helpful worker," to suggest just a few. Even within one relationship, we play a variety of roles. As you grew up, you almost certainly changed characters as you interacted with your parents. In one context you acted as the responsible adult ("You can trust me with the car!"), and at another time you were the helpless child ("I can't find my socks!"). Likewise, in romantic relationships, we switch among many ways of behaving, depending on the context: friend, lover, business partner, critic, and so on.

Each of us constructs multiple identities, many of which may be independent or even conflicting (Spears, 2001). For example, some student-athletes experience tension when the roles of student and athlete seem to have incompatible demands (Yopyk & Prentice, 2005). Most of us seek to be perceived as warm (friendly, trustworthy) and competent (intelligent, skillful), yet we may see these two impressions as incompatible (Holoien & Fiske, 2013). Thus, people often "play dumb" when the goal is to be liked, and they become overly critical when the goal is to look smart. Balancing these two impressions is a skillful act.

It's tempting to regard some of your identities as more "real" than others, but it's more accurate to recognize that all of them are you in various roles. You may not enjoy brownnosing the boss or placating an angry customer, but that doesn't make those behaviors "not you." Instead, it means you're playing the role of "respectful employee" or "dedicated server" in ways that you (and perhaps society) deem appropriate. Communication researchers argue that differentiating between "fake" and "real" selves is counterproductive (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). Instead, it's healthier to recognize that competent communicators are multifaceted people with a variety of roles and identities—all of which are "you."

Impression Management Is Collaborative

As we perform our multiple identities, our audience is made up of other actors who are trying to create their own characters. Identity-related communication is a kind of improvisation in which our character reacts with others. Good-natured teasing only works if the other person appreciates your humor and responds well. (Imagine how your kidding would fall flat if somebody didn't get or enjoy the joke.) Likewise, being a successful romantic can succeed only if the object of your affections plays his or her part.

Impression Management Can Be Deliberate or Unconscious

There's no doubt that sometimes we are highly aware of managing our identities. Most job interviews and first dates are clear examples of deliberate impression management. But in other cases we unconsciously act in ways that

Impression management is part of living in a society. The challenge is making sure the public self you construct is consistent with your values and beliefs. ***How satisfied are you with the identities you have created? Are there better ways to manage impressions about yourself?***

are performances for others. For example, in a classic experiment participants expressed facial disgust in reaction to eating sandwiches laced with saltwater only when there was another person present; when they were alone, they made no faces (Brightman et al., 1975). Another study showed that communicators engage in facial mimicry (such as smiling or looking sympathetic in response to another's message) only in face-to-face settings, when their expressions can be seen by the other person. When they are speaking over the phone and their reactions cannot be seen, they do not make the same expressions (Chovil, 1991). Studies such as these suggest that much of our behavior is aimed at sending messages to others—in other words, impression management.

It would be an exaggeration to suggest that *all* behavior is aimed at making impressions. Young children certainly aren't strategic communicators. A baby spontaneously laughs when pleased and cries when sad or uncomfortable, without any notion of creating an impression. Likewise, there are almost certainly times when we, as adults, act spontaneously. On the whole, however, impression management strategies influence our communication.

FACE-TO-FACE IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

In face-to-face interaction, communicators can manage their front in three ways: manner, appearance, and setting. *Manner* consists of a communicator's words and nonverbal actions. In Chapters 5 and 6, we describe in detail how what you say and do create impressions. Because you have to speak and act, the question isn't whether your manner sends a message; rather, it's whether these messages will be intentional.

A second dimension of impression management is *appearance*—the personal items people use to shape an image. Sometimes clothing is part of creating a professional image. A physician's white lab coat and a police officer's uniform set the wearer apart as someone special. In the business world, a tailored suit creates a very different impression from a rumpled outfit. Off the job, clothing is just as important. People dressed in upper-middle-class fashion have a very different experience shopping than those in lower-class fashion (Aliakbari & Abdolahi, 2013). We choose clothing that sends a message about ourselves: "I'm wealthy," "I'm stylish," "I'm sexy," "I'm athletic," and a host of other possible messages.

A final way to manage impressions is through the choice of *setting*—physical items we use to influence how others view us. Cars are one example. A sporty convertible or fancy imported sedan doesn't just get drivers from one place to another; it also makes statements about the kind of people they are. The physical setting we choose and the way we arrange it are other important ways to manage impressions. How do you decorate your living space? What artwork is on your walls? What music do you play? If possible, we choose a setting that we enjoy, but in many cases we create an environment that will present the desired front to others.

IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT IN SOCIAL MEDIA

Impression management is just as pervasive and important in mediated communication as in face-to-face interaction. At first glance, social media

@work Impression Management in the Workplace

Some advisors encourage workers to "just be yourself" on the job. But there are times when disclosing certain information about your personal life can damage your chances for success (Connell, 2012). This is especially true for people with "invisible stigmas"—traits that run the risk of being viewed unfavorably (Butler & Modaff, 2016).

Many parts of a worker's identity have the potential to be invisible stigmas: religion (evangelical Christian, Muslim), sexual orientation (gay, lesbian, bisexual), or health (bipolar, HIV positive). What counts as a stigma to some people (liberal, conservative) might be favored in another organization (Ragins & Singh, 2007).

As you consider how to manage your identity at work, take the following into account:

- *Proceed with caution*. In an ideal world, it would be safe to reveal ourselves without hesitation. But in real life, total candor can have consequences, so it may be best to move slowly.
- *Assess the organization's culture*. If your workplace seems supportive of differences—and especially if it appears to welcome people like you—then revealing more of yourself may be safe.
- *Consider the consequences of not opening up*. Keeping an important part of your identity secret can also take an emotional toll (Pachankis, 2007). If staying quiet is truly necessary, you may be better off finding a more welcoming place to work.
- *Test the waters*. If you have a trusted colleague or manager, think about revealing yourself to that person and asking advice about whether and how to go further. But realize that secrets can be leaked, so be sure the person you approach can keep confidences.

seem to limit the potential for impression management. Texting and email, for example, appear to lack the "richness" of other channels. They don't convey the tone of your voice, postures, gestures, or facial expressions. However, what is missing in mediated messages can actually be an advantage for communicators who want to manage the impressions they make (Bazarova et al., 2012).

For instance, emailers and texters can choose the desired level of clarity or ambiguity, seriousness or humor, logic or emotion in their messages. And as you learned in Chapter 1, the asynchronicity of most digital correspondence allows a sender to say difficult things without forcing the receiver to respond immediately, permitting the receiver to ignore a message rather than give an unpleasant response. Options like these show that social media can serve as a tool for impression management at least as well as the face-to-face variety (Tong & Walther, 2011b). Part of Snapchat's appeal is that it involves less impression management, because its photos vanish after a few seconds. Social media analyst Jean Twenge says this is appealing to teens who think, "If I make a funny face or use one of the filters to make myself look like a dog, it's going to disappear. It won't be something permanent my enemies at school can troll me about" (Stein, 2017).

Media Clip

The Promise and Perils of Online Relationships: *Catfish: The TV Show*

Nev Schulman knows what it's like to be in an online romance with a virtual stranger. The documentary *Catfish* chronicled his introduction to online relationships, and now, in this TV series, he wants to help others navigate those challenges.

The face-to-face encounters that Nev and his co-host, Max Joseph, arrange usually involve surprises. That's because the romantic partners' online personas typically don't match their real-life identities. Sometimes the "catfishers" have a different age, gender, or appearance from what they present on social media. But even when they've been truthful, the partners often have trouble interacting in person after months or years of impression management through digital media.

Video chat tools such as FaceTime and Skype would seem to make catfishing outmoded. But the show still offers plenty of examples of people who fall in love via text-based messages and voice calls, without ever seeing their partners. This demonstrates the power of words in creating intimacy—and also that some people have an easier time forging a relationship with an illusion than with a real person.

Social networking platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram all provide opportunities for their creators to manage impressions (Bowman, 2015; Hall et al., 2014). Consider how featuring or withholding the following kinds of information affects how others might regard your online profile: age, personal photo, educational or career accomplishments, sexual orientation, job title, personal interests, personal philosophy and religious beliefs, and organizations to which you belong (Doster, 2013). One study analyzed the Instagram feeds of 27 professional athletes and noted how they carefully presented themselves according to societal gender norms (Smith & Sanderson, 2015). But social media can also offer opportunities for transgender individuals to forge and manage their gender identities (Cavalcante, 2016).

When undergraduate Facebook users were asked how they think they come across in their profiles (Toma & Carlson, 2015), most acknowledged that their self-presentations are highly positive—but not *too* positive. In general, they believed their profiles portrayed them as better than reality on certain dimensions (e.g., "funny," "adventurous," "outgoing"), accurately on other dimensions (e.g., "physically attractive," "creative"), and worse than reality on yet other dimensions (e.g., "intelligent," "polite," "reliable"). It appears that the participants realized—perhaps intuitively—that their Facebook sites are an exercise in impression management.

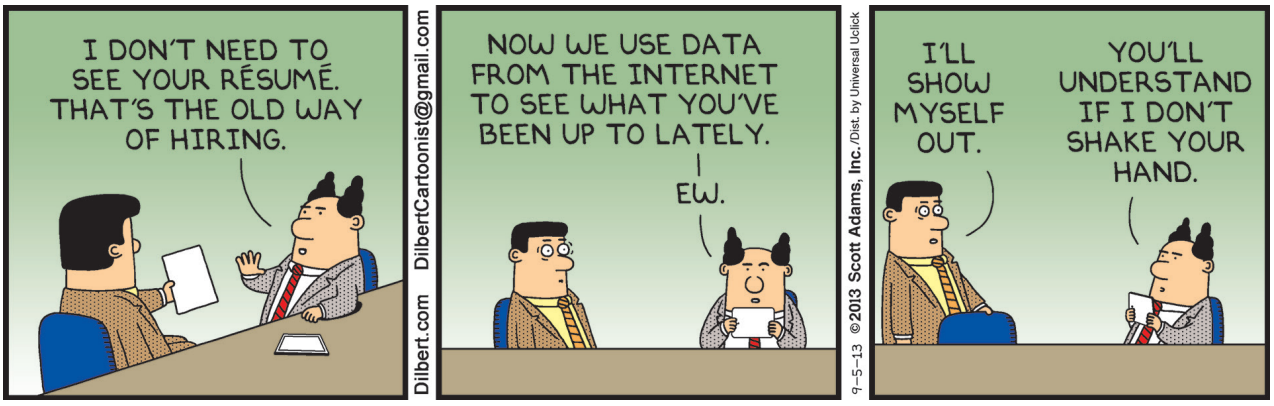
Viewing your online presence from another perspective can be a valuable impression management exercise. Enter your name in a search engine and see what pops up. You may decide it's time to engage in what researchers call "reputation management" (Madden & Smith, 2010). Perhaps you'll want to change privacy settings on your profiles, customize who can see certain updates, and delete unwanted information about yourself.

IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT AND HONESTY

At first, impression management might sound like an academic label for manipulation or phoniness. There certainly are situations where people misrepresent themselves to gain the trust of others (Rui & Stefanone, 2013; Whitty, 2007). A manipulative date who pretends to be affectionate to gain sexual favors is clearly unethical and deceitful. So are job applicants who lie about their academic records to get hired or salespeople who pretend to be dedicated to customer service when their real goal is to make a quick buck.

Online deception is common—indeed, many believe that "everyone lies on the internet" (Drouin et al., 2016). In one survey, 27 percent of respondents had engaged in deceptive behaviors while online (Lenhart et al., 2001), and a diary study found that 22 percent to 25 percent of mediated interactions involve deception (George & Robb, 2008). A quarter of teens have pretended to be a different person online, and a third confess they have given false information about themselves while emailing, IMing, or game playing. Even the selection of an avatar can involve deception (Galanxhi & Nah, 2007). And it's not unusual for people to adopt different gender identities online (Guadagno et al., 2012). Some of these deceptions are relatively harmless, but others have serious consequences. Notre Dame football star Manti Te'o was duped in an internet hoax that led to national embarrassment (Jonsson, 2013), and *Catfish: The TV Show* chronicles what happens when online partners discover they've been deceived (see the Media Clip sidebar in this section).

Interviewees in one study (Toma et al., 2008) acknowledged the delicate task of balancing an ideal online identity against the "real" self behind their profile. Many admitted they sometimes fudged facts about themselves—using outdated photos or "forgetting" information about their age, for instance. But respondents were less tolerant when prospective dates posted inaccurate identities. For example, one date-seeker expressed resentment upon learning that a purported "hiker" hadn't hiked in years. Ultimately, online daters are skeptical of profiles that seem too good to be true. Candidates who present themselves in honest and even humble ways are generally perceived as more attractive than those who



come off as braggers (Wotipka & High, 2016). A little impression management and self-promotion is okay, but too much can raise red flags (Heck & Krueger, 2016).

These examples raise important ethical questions about impression management. Is it okay to omit certain information in an online dating service in an attempt to put your best foot forward? In a job interview, is it legitimate to act more confident and reasonable than you really feel? Likewise, are you justified in acting attentive in a boring conversation out of courtesy to the other person? Is it sometimes wise to use false names and information on the internet for your protection and security? Situations like these suggest that managing impressions doesn't necessarily make you a liar. In fact, it is almost impossible to imagine how we could communicate effectively without making decisions about which front to present in one situation or another.

Each of us has a repertoire of faces—a cast of characters—and part of being a competent communicator is choosing the best role for a situation. Imagine yourself in each of the following situations, and choose the most effective way you could act, considering the options:

- You offer to teach a friend a new skill, such as playing the guitar, operating a computer program, or sharpening up a tennis backhand. Your friend is making slow progress with the skill, and you find yourself growing impatient.
- You've been corresponding for several weeks with someone you met online, and the relationship is starting to turn romantic. You have a physical trait that you haven't mentioned.
- At work you face a belligerent customer. You don't believe that anyone has the right to treat you this way.

In each of these situations—and in countless others every day—you have a choice about how to act. It is an oversimplification to say that there is only one honest way to behave in each circumstance and that every other response would be insincere and dishonest. Instead, impression management involves deciding which face—which part of yourself—to reveal.

DISCLOSING THE SELF

What we choose to disclose about ourselves is an important component of impression management. So what constitutes self-disclosure? You might argue that aside from secrets, it's impossible *not* to make yourself known to others. After all, every time you post online or speak, you're revealing your tastes, interests, desires, opinions, beliefs, or some other bit of information about yourself. In addition, Chapter 6 explains how each of us communicates nonverbally.

If every verbal and nonverbal behavior in which you engage is self-revealing, how can self-disclosure be distinguished from any other act of communication? Psychologist Paul Cozby (1973) offers an answer. He suggests that for a communication act to be considered self-disclosing, (1) it must contain personal information about the sender, (2) the sender must communicate this information verbally, and (3) another person must be the target. Put differently, the subject of self-disclosing communication is the