

THE PRESENTATION OF SELF THROUGH ACTION IDENTIFICATION

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This study examined the relevance of action identification principles to the dynamics of self-presentation. Subjects received either success or failure feedback for attempted artwork and then were led to expect interaction with a stranger who ostensibly valued either boastfulness or modesty in other people. Prior to this expected interaction, subjects were asked to provide descriptions of their behavior in the artwork portion of the study, with the understanding that these action identities would be passed on to their interaction partner. Action identification theory holds that successful actions tend to be identified at relatively high (meaningful, self-descriptive) levels, whereas unsuccessful actions tend to be identified at lower (movement-defined) levels. In line with this reasoning, failure subjects were expected to describe their artwork behavior at a lower level than was expected of success subjects. And if this were the case, self-presentation goals might also influence identification level: Anticipated interaction with someone who was thought to like boastful others (people who emphasize their accomplishments and general effectiveness) was expected to promote relatively high-level identities in action communication, whereas anticipated interaction with someone who was thought to like modest others (those who downplay their accomplishments and effectiveness) was expected to promote the communication of one's action in lower-level terms. Results supported these predictions.

Social relations are vitally dependent on shared understanding of one another's actions. To initiate any sort of relationship, and to maintain a relationship once initiated, the partners to the relationship must com-

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municate in a convincing fashion what they are doing, have done, or plan to do. The viability of a relationship depends on another factor as well: consensus concerning the personalities and other qualities of the parties to the relationship. The failure to sustain even a casual conversation with a stranger is often attributable to implicit disagreement concerning the "face" of one or both of the interactants (cf. Goffman, 1959). This study explores the possibility that these two components of social relations—the identification of action and the management of social identities—are intimately and causally related. More specifically, the "self" that a person presents to others in social relations is built upon the identities that the person communicates for his or her acts.

If actions were unambiguous in their meaning, this route to self-presentation would be denied. However, as philosophers have taken pains to inform us, anything a person does admits to an untold number of potential identifications (cf. Anscombe, 1957; Danto, 1963; Goldman, 1970). Something as basic as "eating food," for instance, could be identified under different circumstances and with varying mental sets as "getting nutrition," "gaining weight," "satisfying one's hunger," "fulfilling a social obligation," or simply "using eating utensils." This inherent uncertainty in the identity of an act puts the onus on the actor to identify his or her past, present, or future actions. When these action identities are communicated to others, in turn, they hold potential for shaping the image that others have of the actor. Saying that one is "gaining weight," for instance, conveys a different image of oneself from that conveyed by saying that one is "getting nutrition."

THE IDENTIFICATION OF ACTION

That people can provide different accounts of the same action has been recognized in various theoretical traditions relevant to self-presentation. Each of these traditions holds that action accounting is motivated by basic interpersonal concerns, although they differ regarding the specific nature of such concerns. For some, the prime concern is said to be the structuring of a particular social setting so as to facilitate coordinated social interaction (e.g., Alexander & Knight, 1971; Goffman, 1959; Modiglianai, 1968; Shotter, 1981). For others, the prime concern is said to be the gaining of social approval (e.g., Schlenker, 1980). For yet others, establishing control over others' behavior so as to maximize one's self-interest is considered the prime concern (e.g., Jones & Pittman, 1982). While each of these purported orientations is associated with a particular set of self-presentation strategies, they all

embrace the premise that the social actor attempts to direct others to preferred meanings of the act.

Interpersonal concerns can certainly shape one's account of action, but it may prove useful to couch such concerns in the broader context of the mental representation and control of action. Action identification theory (Vallacher & Wegner, 1985, 1987; Wegner & Vallacher, 1986) represents an attempt to provide such a context. This theory begins with the recognition that any action can be described in many ways, and then goes on to prescribe a system in which the range of potentially prepotent identities for an action is sharply restricted in the face of functional requirements. Specifically, the identity that assumes prepotence for someone performing an action at a given time in a given circumstance is said to reflect a trade-off between two conflicting forces: a desire for comprehensive understanding and the demands of effective performance.

The desire for comprehensive understanding sensitizes the person to the action's consequences, implications for self and others, and socially conveyed meanings (e.g., Wegner, Vallacher, Kiersted, & Dizadji, 1986; Wegner, Vallacher, Macomber, Wood, & Arps, 1984). Such depictions of an act are functionally superordinate to more mechanistically defined identities and so can be considered high-level identities in a cognitive hierarchy of possible identities. "Demonstrating skill" and "throwing a party," for example, both impart comprehensive meaning to action, and each is relatively high-level in that it subsumes more basic depictions of the action (e.g., "preparing appetizers," "mixing cocktails"). Despite the appeal of understanding action in high-level terms, however, such understanding may prove to be a poor guide to the conduct of action itself. "Throwing a party," for instance, is a more comprehensive and meaningful identity than "preparing appetizers" or "mixing cocktails," but the latter must assume prepotence at the expense of the former if the party is to be thrown. Even the appetizer and cocktail identities may be too abstract to remain prepotent, yielding to more basic or lower-level identities such as "boiling shrimp" or "adding vermouth."

The particular action identity that assumes prepotence for a person, then, is not determined simply by a concern with meaning, but rather by the interplay of this concern and effective performance considerations. The theory goes on to suggest specific factors that forge a compromise between these competing forces. Foremost among these factors are those that impinge upon the success versus failure of the action. If successfully enacted, an action tends to be identified at a relatively high level; if unsuccessfully enacted, it tends to be identified in lower-level terms. Thus, for example, actions that are relatively easy

or familiar for an actor tend to be identified at a higher level than actions that prove to be more difficult and less familiar (Vallacher & Wegner, 1987).

With increases in level, action identities come to have an *ascriptive* as well as a purely *descriptive* quality to them (cf. Feinberg, 1970; Hart, 1948-1949). Knowing only that a person has "jumped into the water," for example, we are in a position to infer very little about the personal makeup of the person. However, if this act is identified at a higher level—as "saving a drowning person," perhaps—we are quite willing to infer the existence of various personal attributes (courage, a concern for human life, etc.). In the same way, "seeking social approval" is more informative about the actor than is "talking to someone," and "creating art" is similarly more informative than "making marks on a paper." When viewed in light of the link between action effectiveness and identification level, this reasoning suggests that action identities tend to be ascriptive rather than merely descriptive to the extent that the actor has experienced success rather than failure in his or her attempts to do something. On the heels of success, the actor is likely to think about the action in a relatively meaningful, even self-defining way; in the face of failure, the actor is likely to think about the action in more mechanistic terms.

ACTION IDENTIFICATION AND SELF-PRESENTATION

Because the principles of action identification theory were developed with respect to people's personal understanding and control of behavior, they may not fully capture the public nature of action identification inherent in social contexts. Our suspicion is that these principles are indeed operative in the communication of action, but that their manifestation must take into account people's communication goals. To begin with, given the potential for self-definition inherent in high-level identities, people may communicate such identities to others when they wish to convey a particular self-view. A person who wants to be seen as friendly, for instance, may describe a particular remark on his or her part as a "friendly question." If the person wants to be seen as assertive, meanwhile, he or she might identify the same remark as a "demand for information." Without describing one's attributes explicitly, then, one can nonetheless convey these qualities of self through ascriptively toned high-level identities.

At the same time, there may be conditions under which people are likely to describe what they have done in ways that are virtually

devoid of explicit higher-level meaning and self-defining significance. Indeed, given the link between action effectiveness and identification level, the use of high-level identities to communicate what one has done is likely to be restricted to instances of effective action. There is a certain aura of personal competence surrounding an identity such as "I fixed the wiring in the house" that is lacking in a more mechanistic identity such as "I operated a screwdriver," but unless the actor has in fact successfully performed the former identity, he or she cannot claim it as a valid depiction of what was done. One's communication of ineffective action, then, is likely to be devoid of ascriptively toned identities, centering instead on the lower-level aspects of what one has done. Thus, on the heels of a failure experience, a person is likely to be sensitive to the lower-level substrate of his or her action and to communicate these identities to others when queried about the action.

Lower-level identities for an ineffective act are not without self-presentation value, however, since they effectively remove one's "self" from the action, and thus dissuade the communication target from assigning personal qualities to the person (including those connoting incompetence), and perhaps from assigning personal responsibility as well. Even when one has done something well, there may be a subtle self-presentational payoff to the communication of action in lower-level terms. Occasions arise, in particular, when one does not wish to be seen as arrogant or boastful, but rather as modest regarding one's accomplishments (e.g., Schneider & Eustis, 1972). The link between competence and identification level suggests that on such occasions the person might prefer lower-level to higher-level identities, even though the latter provide a better personal depiction of what one has done. By focusing on the details of his or her action, the person appears to minimize his or her accomplishments, implying that anyone who follows the indicated recipe will meet with the same success. In this regard, one envisions the baseball superstar who responds modestly to praise by claiming, "I just go out there and swing a bat." The person who presents an action in this way, of course, is not avoiding the ascription of personal qualities altogether. Rather, such a person is cultivating an image of someone who is competent or otherwise admirable, yet does not feel compelled to brag about it.

In effect, the extension of action identification principles to the communication of action allows for a certain "coyness" in self-presentation. Rather than boasting of one's personal competence, a person might nonetheless communicate this image of himself or herself

through high-level identities. And rather than admitting failure or explaining it away, one can simply (and honestly) describe what one has done in mechanistic terms, thereby circumventing the presentation of oneself as incompetent. Finally, one can cultivate an image of modesty in the eyes of others by describing action—even successful action—in relatively low-level terms.

OVERVIEW OF THE PRESENT INVESTIGATION

The communication of action through low-level versus high-level identities, in sum, can serve a variety of self-presentational goals in social interaction. Knowing the goals made salient by the interpersonal context, as well as the effectiveness of the person's behavior, thus allows prediction of how the action will be publicly identified. The present investigation examined these ideas concerning action identification and self-presentation in the context of an anticipated "get-acquainted" interaction between two people. Subjects first performed a task for which they received bogus success or failure feedback. They then were asked to provide a description of their behavior on this task to a stranger of the same sex whom they thought they were about to meet. Prior to fashioning this description, subjects were led to believe that the stranger especially liked people who tended to be either boastful or modest regarding their attributes and accomplishments, or they were not informed of any such preference.

We predicted that subjects would identify their task behavior at different levels, depending on the nature of the performance feedback and the interpersonal preferences attributed to their bogus interaction partner. The natural tendency to identify successful action at a high level, first of all, would be likely to be reinforced when the communication target was judged to value pride and boastfulness in others. However, when the communication target was judged to value modesty regarding one's accomplishments and abilities, the actor might be inclined to suspend the natural orientation toward high-level, ascriptive identities in favor of lower-level, "how-to" sorts of identities. The natural tendency to identify ineffective action in relatively low-level terms, meanwhile, should be expressed in action communication, whether the communication target was thought to value boastfulness or modesty. To be sure, low-level identification of ineffective action would not satisfy the self-presentational goal of boastfulness, but it would remove one's self from the action and thus curtail the self-presentational damage associated with failure. In the case of modesty, low-level identification for ineffective action would be both natural

and conducive to impressing the communication target with one's humility.

METHOD

SUBJECTS AND DESIGN

A total of 51 undergraduates (14 males, 37 females) participated individually in a two-part study in exchange for extra credit in their psychology courses. In the first part, subjects created a piece of art for which they received either (bogus) success or failure feedback. In the second part, subjects anticipated a get-acquainted conversation with someone of the same sex who was said to look for particular qualities in other people. Some subjects learned that the conversation partner liked people who were boastful regarding their accomplishments and competence, whereas others learned that he or she liked others who were modest rather than boastful. Subjects in a control group were told nothing about the conversation partner's preference for boastfulness versus modesty in others. Prior to meeting the interaction partner, subjects were asked to rate the appropriateness of various descriptions of their task behavior, which allegedly were to be passed on to the interaction partner. The dependent measures included subjects' ratings of the various task descriptions and their inferences regarding their partner's impression of them after reading the descriptions.

PROCEDURE

The first part of the study was described as an assessment of subjects' "latent creativity." Subjects were asked to draw a number from 0 to 9 on a piece of paper and then create an imaginative drawing, using the number as a base. They were told that their drawing would be evaluated by an art expert when they were through, and that this feedback on their latent creativity would be provided before they went on to the second part of the study. Subjects were then given 15 minutes to work on the drawing, after which the drawing was ostensibly passed on to the art expert. While waiting for the feedback, subjects were informed that the second part of the study would involve a get-acquainted conversation with someone of the same sex. They were told that the concern of the study was with how strangers formed impressions of each other. To gain preliminary insight into the personality of the person they were about to meet, subjects were given a handwritten

answer to the question "What qualities do you look for in people?" that purportedly was provided by the other person. There were three standard answers; these were intended to serve as a manipulation of self-presentation goal. Subjects were given 2 minutes to look over their partner's answer.

While subjects looked over their partner's answer, the experimenter left the room, ostensibly to retrieve their drawings and associated feedback from the art expert. The experimenter returned upon completion of the 2-minute period and handed subjects their drawing and the expert's evaluative feedback. There were two versions of feedback, associated randomly with subjects' drawings; this constituted a manipulation of success versus failure. After reading the feedback, subjects were told they would soon be taking part in the get-acquainted conversation; first, however, the experimenter wanted them to provide some information about themselves to the person they were going to meet, so that he or she would know a little about them. The experimenter reasoned that a description of what they had been doing in the first part of the study might be informative in this regard. Subjects then were administered a "behavior description" questionnaire from which dependent measures pertaining to action identification were derived. Subjects also were asked to complete another questionnaire from which several other dependent measures were subsequently derived. Upon completion of the second questionnaire, subjects were debriefed concerning the true purpose of the study and the deceptions employed, assigned their extra credit, and dismissed.

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

Self-Presentation Goal

Subjects read one of three standard answers that allegedly had been written by the anticipated interaction partner. All answers emphasized the importance of such socially desirable qualities as sincerity, honesty, and a sense of humor. In a "baseline desirability" condition, these qualities were the only ones stressed. In a "boastfulness" condition, the answer went on to emphasize an appreciation of qualities connoting personal competence, self-confidence, and boastfulness (e.g., "I like a person who knows he's good and isn't afraid to admit it"). In a "modesty" condition, the answer went beyond the core socially desirable attributes to emphasize an appreciation of qualities

connoting modesty and humility (e.g., "I like a person who doesn't go around bragging about how good he is"). The boastfulness and modesty answers were 250 and 280 words in length, respectively, while the control answer consisted of 190 words. In a pilot sample ($n=15$), all three answers were judged to reflect equally good criteria for evaluating people.

Performance Feedback

Subjects were provided with one of two standard commentaries on their artwork. Subjects in a "success" condition were told that, in the view of the expert, their drawing showed unmistakable signs of talent and was in the top 25% of all that had been seen. Subjects in a "failure" condition, in turn, were informed that their effort lacked signs of true talent and was in the bottom 25% of all the drawings evaluated thus far. This verbal feedback was reinforced by a handwritten message at the top of the drawing that said either "upper quartile" (success condition) or "lower quartile" (failure condition).

DEPENDENT MEASURES

Action Identification

To provide a description of their behavior in the first part of the study, subjects were asked to complete a questionnaire consisting of 44 action identities for their participation in that portion. Each identity on this questionnaire was presented as a first-person, past-tense statement of behavior (e.g., "I created a work of art"). The set of identities was generated by individuals in an earlier pilot sample ($n=15$), who had been asked to perform the drawing task and then list as many one-sentence descriptions of their behavior as they could in 5 minutes. The 44 most frequently listed descriptions provided the basis for the questionnaire. The resultant identities consisted of low-level descriptions (e.g., "I moved my hands"), as well as higher-level descriptions that differed along a variety of dimensions (e.g., talent, effort, expression of personality). Each identity was to be rated along a 7-point scale according to how well it described what subjects had done in the first part of the study. Subjects were told that these ratings were to be passed on to the other person so as to give the person an idea of what they might be like.

In order to derive action identity variables from this question-

naire, the identity ratings were submitted to a principal-axis factor analysis with varimax rotation. This analysis revealed a clear low-level factor and three relatively high-level factors ("creating art," "demonstrating talent," and "doing what is expected"). These factors and their associated identities are displayed in Table 1. Subjects were assigned a score on each factor reflecting their summed endorsements of the items loading on that factor.¹

Expected Impression

Subjects were asked to estimate their partner's impression of them after reading their action identity ratings. Six personality trait dimensions, each presented as a 7-point bipolar scale, were provided for these estimates: "modest-boastful," "friendly-unfriendly," "arrogant-humble," "insincere-sincere," "likable-unlikable," and "competent-incompetent."

Manipulation Checks

For each of the six personality dimensions used to assess expected impressions (e.g., "modest-boastful"), subjects were asked to estimate where on the corresponding 7-point scale their partner would locate someone he or she typically got along with well. These judgments, which were made after subjects read their partner's essay and received performance feedback, but before they rated the action identities, were designed to assess whether subjects understood their partner's personality preferences as expressed in his or her essay. After rating the action identities, subjects were asked to rate their ability to create drawings with artistic merit *vis-à-vis* the ability of other students who performed the drawing task. A 7-point scale was provided for this judgment; the anchors were "much greater" and "much less," with the midpoint labeled "equal." This item served as a check on the effectiveness of the performance feedback manipulation.

1. A slightly larger set of factors was observed in a factor analysis of these identities reported in Vallacher and Wegner (1985). In that report, subjects were assigned a proportion score on each factor, reflecting their summed endorsement of the items loading on that factor relative to their total endorsement of identities across all factors. The results of analyses on those scores are essentially the same as those employing the summed scores reported in this article.

TABLE 1
 "Drawing" Identity Factors

FACTOR	LOADING	IDENTITY
1. "Creating art"	-.85	Produced an unimaginative drawing
	.78	Created an interesting drawing
	-.70	Showed how unimaginative I am
	.69	Enjoyed myself
	.66	Connected lines in a unique way
	.64	Used my imagination
	.62	Demonstrated my uniqueness
	.62	Created a work of art
	.61	Succeeded in creating an aesthetically pleasant drawing
	-.60	Failed to create an aesthetically pleasant drawing
	-.58	Demonstrated my lack of talent
	.57	Produced an imaginative drawing
	.53	Created a piece of art through imagination
2. "Demonstrating talent"	.67	Followed my impulses
	.64	Spent time drawing
	.57	Showed how imaginative I am
	.56	Demonstrated my talent
	.34	Learned about my abilities
3. Low-level Factor	.69	Put lines together in an obvious pattern
	.68	Thought about every mark I made
	.66	Put various lines together into a unique design
	.60	Added lines to a number
	.59	Drew lines on a piece of paper
	.47	Made pencil marks on a piece of paper
4. "Doing what is expected"	.78	Coordinated the movements of my fingers and hands
	.77	Participated in an experiment
	.77	Chose a number
	.74	Complied with the experimenter
	.73	Did what was expected of me
	.58	Used up paper

Note. Factors were derived from the varimax rotation of a principal-axis analysis on 44 identities, and accounted for 48.6% of the unrotated variance.

RESULTS

MANIPULATION CHECKS

Self-Presentation Goal

Analyses of variance (ANOVAs) confirmed the effectiveness of the self-presentation goal manipulation. A highly reliable self-presentation goal effect was obtained, first of all, on the "modest-boastful" dimension, $F(2, 45) = 84.64, p < .0001$. Subjects who read the boastfulness essay indicated that the target strongly valued boastfulness ($M = 6.20$), whereas those who read the modesty essay indicated that the target strongly valued modesty ($M = 1.61$); subjects who read the baseline essay also tended to assume that their partner valued modesty ($M = 2.22$). The complementary self-presentation goal effect was obtained for "arrogant-humble," $F(2, 45) = 74.78, p < .0001$: Subjects in the boastfulness condition indicated that their partner would describe his or her friends as arrogant ($M = 2.33$), whereas subjects in the modesty condition indicated that their partner would describe his or her friends as humble ($M = 6.56$); subjects in the baseline condition also felt that their partner valued humility over arrogance ($M = 5.83$).

Performance Feedback

On the item assessing subjects' self-perceived drawing ability *vis-à-vis* that of other students, a 2×3 ANOVA corresponding to the study's design revealed a main effect for performance feedback, $F(1, 45) = 8.00, p < .001$. Subjects who received failure feedback credited themselves with less ability ($M = 2.40$) than did those receiving success feedback ($M = 3.23$). There was also a reliable effect for impression goal, $F(2, 45) = 5.47, p < .005$. Subjects who anticipated interacting with someone who valued boastfulness attributed more ability to themselves ($M = 3.53$) than did subjects who anticipated interacting with someone who valued either modesty ($M = 2.39$) or baseline desirability ($M = 2.67$).

ACTION IDENTIFICATION

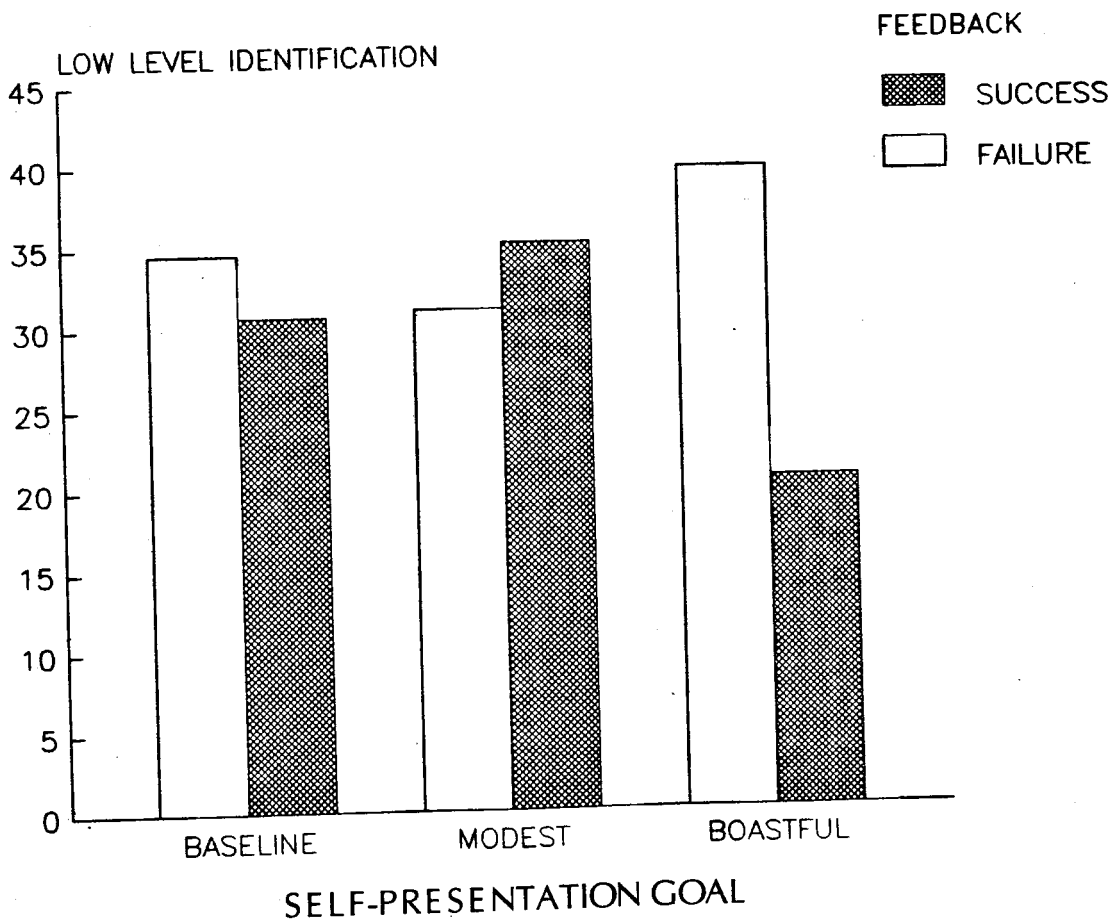
ANOVAs were performed on the four action identity indices. Although the hypotheses were developed with respect to low-level identification, analyses of the high-level indices were expected to provide insight into the specific dimensions of meaning that become prepo-

tent under different combinations of performance effectiveness and self-presentation concern.

Low-Level Identification

The results obtained for the low-level factor provided support for the hypotheses. A reliable effect was obtained, first of all, for performance feedback, $F(1, 45) = 4.88, p < .03$. Subjects who thought they performed poorly relative to other students tended to describe their artwork behavior in lower-level terms ($M = 34.76$) than did those who thought they performed better than other students ($M = 29.12$). There was also a reliable self-presentation goal \times performance feedback interaction, $F(2, 45) = 7.01, p < .002$ (see Figure 1). To decompose this interaction, pairwise comparisons were performed between the self-presentation goal conditions for each level of performance feedback, and between the feedback conditions for each level of self-presentation goal.

FIGURE 1
Low-level identification by self-presentation goal and performance feedback.



When the data were blocked on feedback, results showed that among subjects in the failure condition, there was a tendency to emphasize the lower-level, movement-defined aspects of what they had done, regardless of their partner's ostensible preferences (all t 's < 1.75 , n.s.). Among subjects who succeeded at the drawing task, however, the complementary tendency to downplay the mechanical aspects of one's action was manifest only if the interaction partner ostensibly valued boastfulness. Thus, success subjects who anticipated interacting with someone who prized boastfulness downplayed the mechanics of what they had done, relative to success subjects who anticipated interacting with someone who valued either modesty, $t(15) = 4.75$, $p < .001$, or simple social desirability, $t(15) = 3.11$, $p < .007$; for modesty versus baseline desirability, $t(16) = 1.25$, n.s. When the data were blocked on self-presentation goal, only one pairwise comparison proved statistically reliable: Among subjects in the boastfulness condition, low-level identification was endorsed more strongly by those who received failure feedback ($M = 39.71$) than by those who received success feedback ($M = 20.50$), $t(13) = 5.56$, $p < .001$.

These results suggest that while the communication of action in relatively mechanistic terms varies as a function of perceived performance effectiveness, this effect is especially manifest when the target of one's communication is believed to like people who advertise their successes. When anticipating interaction with such a target, people who have experienced success tend to downplay the mechanics of what they have done, relative to those who have experienced failure.

High-Level Indices

ANOVAs revealed statistically reliable and marginally reliable effects for "creating art" and "demonstrating talent," but no effects for "doing what is expected." First, for "creating art," a marginally reliable effect was obtained for self-presentation goal, $F(2, 45) = 2.67$, $p < .08$. Subsequent pairwise comparisons showed that subjects who anticipated interaction with a target who valued boastfulness described their behavior as "creating art" to a greater extent than did subjects who anticipated interaction with a target who valued modesty (M 's = 35.33 vs. 22.22), $t(31) = 2.11$, $p < .04$; no other comparisons proved reliable. This effect, however, should be viewed in the context of a reliable self-presentation goal \times performance feedback effect, $F(2, 45) = 3.91$, $p < .03$. As Figure 2 illustrates and as pairwise comparisons substantiated, this interaction primarily reflects the diminished prepotence of "creating art" among subjects in the failure/modesty condition. Thus, endorsement of "creating art" in this condition

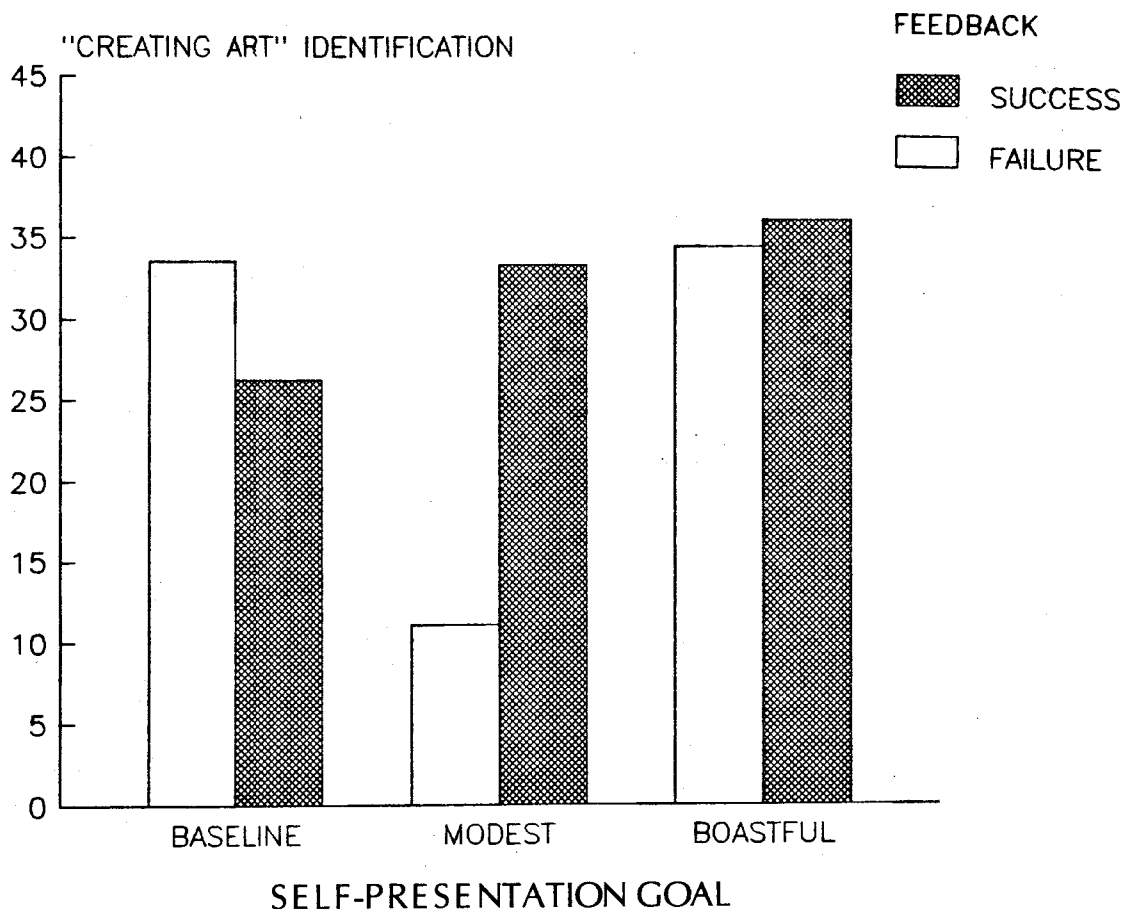


FIGURE 2

"Creating art" by self-presentation goal and performance feedback.

($M=11.11$) was lower than that observed in the success/modesty condition ($M=33.33$), $t(13)=3.38$, $p<.004$; in the failure/boastful condition ($M=34.43$), $t(14)=2.64$, $p<.02$; and in the failure/baseline desirability condition ($M=33.56$), $t(16)=2.97$, $p<.009$. "Creating art" is a very flattering way of presenting one's artistic efforts, and apparently it took both failure feedback and a self-presentation goal of modesty for subjects to forego this description in favor of less flattering descriptions. Even failure subjects endorsed this identity if they thought that their interaction partner liked others who were boastful or that he or she was simply not concerned with modesty.

"Demonstrating talent" is also a flattering depiction of one's efforts, but it is more explicitly self-descriptive in nature than is "creating art." The latter action identity, after all, only implies the manifestation of one's personal qualities, but "demonstrating talent" specifies a particular feature of the self that is revealed in one's action. The results for "demonstrating talent" revealed only a marginally reliable effect for self-presentation goal, $F(2, 45)=2.54$, $p<.09$. As in the case

of "creating art," pairwise comparisons showed that this identity was endorsed more strongly when subjects anticipated interaction with someone who valued boastfulness ($M=24.27$) as opposed to modesty ($M=19.83$), $t(31)=2.36$, $p<.025$; no other comparisons proved reliable. Perhaps because this identity is so blatantly self-descriptive and relevant to self-esteem, subjects were reluctant to disavow it, even in the face of failure feedback, unless the target of their action presentation made it clear that he or she did not value self-aggrandizement.

EXPECTED IMPRESSION

ANOVAs were performed on the six expected-impression items. The results of these analyses suggest that subjects felt their action identity ratings would influence their partner's impression of them. Specifically, there was a reliable self-presentation goal \times performance feedback interaction for the "arrogant-humble" item, $F(2, 45)=6.17$, $p<.001$. Pairwise comparison of the means underlying this interaction (see Table 2) revealed that only subjects who received success feedback and expected to interact with a partner who valued boastfulness thought the partner would see them as arrogant rather than humble; in all other cells, the expected impression on the interaction partner was above the midpoint of the scale (4)—that is, toward the "humble" anchor. It is worth noting that this pattern of means is similar to the pattern of means observed for the low-level identification factor (cf. Figure 1). Thus, only under conditions that promoted high-level identification (i.e., undermined low-level identification) did subjects feel that someone reading their action identity ratings would perceive them as relatively arrogant as opposed to humble. Conversely, when subjects described their behavior in low-level terms (i.e., after receiv-

TABLE 2
Expected Impression on "Arrogant-Humble" Dimension by Self-Presentation Goal and Performance Feedback

PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK	SELF-PRESENTATION GOAL		
	COMPETENCE	MODESTY	BASELINE DESIRABILITY
Success	3.63 _a	5.33 _b	5.33 _b
Failure	5.29 _b	5.22 _b	4.44 _{ab}

Note. Scores could range from 1 (expected impression of "arrogant") to 7 (expected impression of "humble"). Means not sharing a common subscript differ at $p<.05$.

ing failure feedback and/or expecting to meet someone who valued modesty), they expected to impress their interaction partner as humble rather than arrogant.

DISCUSSION

The results of the present investigation demonstrate that the inherent uncertainty of action can be used to one's advantage in social relations. Thus, the actor can direct the communication target's attention to any one of several plausible identities of an act and thereby can cultivate the desired impression on the part of the target. The specific identity communicated by the actor for this purpose is dictated in part by the same forces that shape an act's identity in a private context. This confluence of private and public action identification tendencies is most apparent in the case of ineffective action. Thus, whether or not an action is identified for public consumption, evidence of failure tends to render the act's lower-level components prepotent. In a non-social context, low-level identification following failure establishes contact with the "how-to" components of the action that are necessary for improved performance in the future (Vallacher & Wegner, 1985). In an explicitly social context, low-level identification effectively removes the self from the action and thus minimizes the damage to one's self-image that would otherwise be associated with failure.

It is also apparent from the present data, however, that social pressures to present oneself in a certain way can override performance considerations in the communication of action. Thus, whether people describe what they have done in relatively high-level, self-defining terms seems to be dictated more by the perceived values of the communication target than by their success versus failure in performing the action. Subjects in the present study, regardless of how effectively or ineffectively they thought they had performed, tended to describe their action in high-level terms (i.e., as "creating art" or "demonstrating talent") if the target was believed to value boastfulness in others. The natural tendency to disavow relatively high-level identities for ineffective action was manifest only when the target was believed to appreciate modesty in other people.

To a certain extent, these data are compatible with other perspectives on self-presentation. Virtually all work on self-presentation, first of all, trades on the notion that people are sensitive to the actual or anticipated reactions of others to themselves and attempt to shape these reactions in some way (Arkin, 1980). Subjects in the present study clearly demonstrated such sensitivity and attempts at social

influence. Subjects also demonstrated another defining feature of certain perspectives on self-presentation: accommodation to the expressed or inferred characteristics and preferences of others (e.g., Jones, 1964; Schlenker, 1980). Especially relevant in this regard is research documenting a tendency for people to adjust their self-presentations to match the ostensible self-descriptions provided by someone with whom they expect to interact. Specifically, people expecting to interact with a boastful other tend to be similarly boastful in their self-presentation, whereas people expecting to interact with a modest or self-deprecating other tend to present themselves in a relatively modest fashion as well (e.g., Gergen & Wishnov, 1965; Schneider & Eustis, 1972). Accommodation along these lines was also observed in the present study. Thus, subjects were more inclined to present their action in a boastful manner—as “creating art” or “demonstrating talent”—if the target was believed to value boastfulness as opposed to modesty in other people.

The present data are also consistent with research demonstrating reluctance on the part of people to embrace failure feedback and incorporate its implications into their self-presentation. Baumeister and Jones (1978), for example, found that following failure feedback in one area, subjects tended to compensate by presenting themselves in a highly positive way in another, unrelated area. Schneider (1969), meanwhile, observed that failure tends to elicit compensatory positive self-presentation in the same area as long as the target of self-presentation is unfamiliar with the failure feedback and is in a position to verify subjects' positive self-presentation. In essence, people demonstrate ego-defensiveness in their self-presentations (e.g., Bradley, 1978; Miller & Ross, 1975; Snyder, Stephan, & Rosenfield, 1978), downplaying the personal relevance of failure when it is credible to do so. In line with this tendency, subjects in the present study implicated their personal qualities in the successful performance of action, but demonstrated self-defensiveness with respect to unsuccessful performance by identifying the action in a way that effectively disassociated themselves from the action.

Where the present analysis parts company with other perspectives is in its consideration of how different goals of self-presentation are attained. It is common in other perspectives to posit one of two primary vehicles for self-presentation: self-description and attribution. In research involving self-description, accommodation to others' modest versus boastful self-presentation is reflected in the corresponding positivity of subjects' self-descriptions (e.g., Schneider & Eustis, 1972), and reluctance to embrace failure feedback is reflected in compensatory self-descriptions in subsequent self-presentation con-

texts (e.g., Schneider, 1969). In research involving attribution, meanwhile, it is assumed that people claim personal responsibility for successful action by making internal (i.e., dispositional or effort) attributions, and deflect personal responsibility for failure by making external (excuse-like) attributions (cf. Schlenker, 1980). There are no doubt occasions when people in fact attempt to manage others' impressions by describing their personalities or indicating their standing on competence-related dimensions, or by invoking personal versus situational causes to explain good versus bad performance. Self-description as a self-presentation strategy seems especially likely in settings involving explicit appraisal from others. In a job interview, for example, one is expected to describe one's qualifications and personal attributes that are relevant to the job. Attribution, in turn, may be a common means of enhancing versus deflecting one's responsibility when the action involved has a fixed, publicly agreed-upon identity. When one causes pain or injury, for example, it is hard to convince others—perhaps even oneself—that one was really doing something else. When an action's identity is fixed in this way, the person has little recourse but to engage in ego-defensive attributional strategies.

We suspect, however, that in everyday social encounters self-presentational goals are more frequently attained through action description than through explicit self-description or attribution. Quite simply, when people cultivate impressions of themselves in the eyes of others, they often do so by describing what they are doing, have done, or intend to do (cf. Gauld & Shotter, 1977). Rather than noting one's neutral standing on various trait dimensions in order to convey a sense of modesty, for example, one can simply downplay the self-evaluative significance of what one has done by describing the act in relatively low-level terms. Similarly, to mask one's failings in some area, it is not necessary to provide a compensatory self-description in a different area; instead, one can provide a candid portrayal of the act in low-level terms, and thereby can effectively disassociate one's personal qualities from the act's performance. And because the things people do in daily life rarely have a fixed, immutable identity, it is not necessary to invoke situational causes to justify an untoward act. As the present study demonstrates, even successful and unsuccessful performance of an action that reflects on one's abilities can be presented to others under different identities. Subjects circumvented the potential self-presentational predicament posed by failure, for example, by describing what they had done in low-level, non-self-defining terms. In short, the personal and social concerns underlying self-presentation may be reflected in action description to a greater extent than in self-description or personal versus situational attribution.

Some perspectives relevant to self-presentation do recognize the inherent uncertainty of action and posit an explicit role for action description in the management of one's social identity (e.g., Alexander & Knight, 1971; Ginsburg, 1980; Scott & Lyman, 1968; Shotter, 1981). In such perspectives, however, people's action descriptions are said to be the product of implicit social negotiation processes, in which rules of discourse, shared cultural norms, and specific contextual cues to meaning sharply restrict the range of viable candidates for the act's description. Against this backdrop, the action identities that people communicate to one another are invariably meaningful and self-defining, enabling the actor to claim a special status and thus a distinct kind of treatment from others. The present perspective, in contrast, considers the communication of action identities within the broader context of the principles underlying action understanding and control generally. In this perspective, action identities do not invariably connote noteworthy implications or consequences, nor do they always convey personal qualities of the actor. Thus, even in their role as social actors, people sometimes will communicate an identity for their actions that is essentially stripped of higher-level meaning. According to action identification theory, such low-level identities naturally assume prepotence when an action has been performed ineffectively. The data presented confirm this tendency, as well as the tendency to make use of low-level identities when one does not want to be seen as claiming personal credit for having performed effectively.

The rationale of this study reflects the noncontroversial assumption that the parties to social interaction are motivated by interpersonal concerns. It is also conceivable, though, that the communication of action might be devoid of any concern for how well one's interaction with the communication target proceeds (e.g., Goffman, 1959), how well one is liked by the target (e.g., Schlenker, 1980), or how much power one gains over the target (e.g., Jones & Pittman, 1982). As several commentators have noted, people sometimes are more invested in projecting an image that incorporates their own personal goals and self-defined attributes than in accommodating the preferences of a communication target (Baumeister, 1982; Swann, 1983; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982). From the present perspective, this concern is likely to be manifest any time a person is called upon to describe what he or she is doing with respect to an action that is commonly identified by the person in high-level, self-defining terms.

It is unlikely that the artwork task in the present study represents an action that people would normally see in self-defining terms. It is not too surprising, then, that subjects readily accommodated their description of this behavior to match the ostensible preferences for

modesty versus boastfulness on the part of the communication target. Perhaps if a person were asked to describe a personally meaningful action—one that is understood and maintained with respect to an important high-level identity—he or she would show less inclination to adjust his or her depiction of the action to suit the inferred preferences of an interaction partner. Instead, his or her public identity for the act might reflect solely the sorts of factors that have been shown to dictate people's private identifications of action (e.g., Vallacher & Wegner, 1985, 1987; Wegner & Vallacher, 1986; Wegner *et al.*, 1984, 1986). It remains for future research to examine this possibility.

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