

ON WINNING FRIENDS AND INFLUENCING PEOPLE: ACTION IDENTIFICATION AND SELF-PRESENTATION SUCCESS

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This study tested the performance optimality hypothesis of action identification theory in the context of self-presentation. Optimal performance is said to occur when a personally easy action is identified in relatively high level terms (i.e., the action's goals and likely effects) or a personally difficult action is identified in relatively low level terms (i.e., the action's mechanical details). To test this idea with respect to self-presentation, subjects were asked to describe themselves to either a difficult-to-impress or an easy-to-impress stranger in advance of a get-acquainted conversation with him or her. Subjects were induced to think about the self-description task in either high level terms (e.g., demonstrating their personality) or low level terms (e.g., smiling when appropriate). Support for the optimality hypothesis was obtained in subjects' self-reports of their self-presentation effectiveness and in observers' evaluations of subjects. Discussion centered on the manifestation of self-presentation nonoptimality in the early stages of relationship formation.

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Social interactions can succeed or fail. We may set out to influence someone's opinions, to exchange information, to strike up a friendship, or simply to have a pleasant conversation, and in each instance experience varying degrees of satisfaction or frustration. Influence, information exchange, friendship formation, and conversation engagement thus represent task-oriented behaviors, and as such can be considered in light of the factors that enhance versus undermine performance effectiveness. The present research adopts this tack, examining people's relative success versus failure in a get-acquainted conversation from the perspective of the performance optimality hypothesis of action identification theory (e.g., Vallacher, Wegner, & Somoza, 1989).

To an appreciable extent, the task of achieving social interaction goals (influence, friendship formation, and the like) boils down to the task of self-presentation (cf. Goffman, 1959; Jones, 1964). Especially in the initial stages of a relationship, but to varying degrees even among well-acquainted people, each party to a social encounter attempts to create an image of him or herself, usually positive, in the mind of the other. Social scientists have long recognized this feature of social interaction, of course, and in recent years have provided important clues as to when self-presentation concerns are most salient, what specific self-presentation goals are associated with various circumstances, and how people attempt to implement their self-presentation goals (see, e.g., Arkin, 1980; Baumeister, 1982; Goffman, 1959; Jones & Pittman, 1982; Schlenker, 1980).

Somewhat surprisingly, though, relatively little attention has been paid to the factors that promote or inhibit effectiveness in self-presentation. To be sure, the difficulties inherent in certain self-presentation strategies, particularly ingratiation and self-promotion, have been duly noted (e.g., Jones & Pittman, 1982), as have the personality correlates of individual variation in impression management effectiveness (cf. Snyder & Ickes, 1985). Theory and research on self-presentation, however, have not partaken of the issues and insights that are central to the work on other facets of human performance, work that has highlighted the mental and contextual bases of variation in performance effectiveness. To the extent that self-presentation is indeed a task, one that admits to varying degrees of success and failure, perhaps it can be understood in terms of such performance-relevant variables as task difficulty versus ease (e.g., Zajonc, 1965), self-consciousness (e.g., Baumeister, 1984), evaluation apprehension (e.g., Cottrell, 1972), and outcome salience (e.g., McGraw, 1978; Schwartz, 1982).

ACTION IDENTIFICATION AND PERFORMANCE OPTIMALITY

The principles of action identification theory (Vallacher & Wegner, 1985, 1987; Wegner & Vallacher, 1986) lend themselves quite readily to such an analysis. The theory holds that anything a person does can be identified by the person in many different ways, and that these potentially available act identities each occupy a particular level in an overall hierarchy of identities for the act. An identity hierarchy is defined in functional terms, with lower level identities specifying *how* one does the action and higher level identities expressing *why* or *with what effect* one does the action. "Lifting a glass," for instance, is a low level identity for "drinking alcohol" (i.e., one drinks alcohol by lifting a glass), while "relieving tension" represents a higher level identity of the same act (i.e., one relieves tension by drinking alcohol) (Wegner, Vallacher, & Dizadji, 1989). Whether a particular identity is considered high or low level, of course, depends on the identity with which it is compared. Thus, "drinking alcohol" is high level with respect to "lifting a glass," but low level with respect to "relieving tension."

Research to date suggests that the level of identification that assumes prepotence for a performer depends on the action's subjective performance difficulty (Vallacher & Wegner, 1985, 1987; Vallacher et al., 1989; Wegner & Vallacher, 1986). Specifically, the more subjectively difficult (e.g., complex, unfamiliar, etc.) an action is, the lower the level at which it is likely to be identified. Presumably, this basis for action identification establishes an *optimal* level of identification. Identities at a higher level than this optimum provide insufficient detail to perform the action effectively, whereas identities at a lower level than the optimum promote unnecessary disintegration of the action, robbing the performance of its fluidity and coordination.

At the same time, research has also shown that people commonly identify what they are doing in ways that prove to be nonoptimal for performance (Vallacher & Wegner, 1985). The prepotence of nonoptimal identities reflects the power of the context surrounding an action's performance to enhance the salience of certain identities, regardless of their appropriateness for effective performance. Many contexts are stacked in favor of relatively high level identities, first of all, by virtue of cues to the action's causal effects, socially labeled meanings, and potential for self-evaluation. The promise of reward or the threat of punishment, for example, can serve to redefine any act, no matter how subjectively difficult, in these terms (e.g., McGraw, 1978; Schwartz, 1982). In a similar fashion, pressures to do well generated by such

factors as competition (e.g., Baumeister, 1984; Martens & Landers, 1972), audience evaluation (e.g., Cottrell, 1972), and performance feedback (e.g., Vallacher, Wegner, & Frederick, 1987) can promote the prepotence of self-evaluative high level identities (e.g., "competing," "impressing someone," "showing my skill") at the expense of lower level, more mechanical identities of the act. If the act at stake is best maintained under relatively low level identities by virtue of its subjective difficulty, the higher level identities rendered prepotent by the action context are nonoptimal and thus likely to undermine the person's performance.

Nonoptimal action identification can take another form as well: the identification of a subjectively easy task in relatively low level terms. While it is probably the case that context typically imparts higher level meaning (e.g., personal and interpersonal consequences, moral evaluation, indications of personal competence) to action (cf. Gergen, 1985; Harré & Secord, 1972; Vallacher & Wegner, 1985), our research suggests that certain action contexts can also make people acutely sensitive to the lower level aspects of what they are doing. Thus, the situation may contain distractions, obstacles, and other sources of disruption that serve to render the mechanical features of action prepotent at the expense of concern with the action's larger meanings (Vallacher et al., 1989; Wegner, Connally, Shearer, & Vallacher, 1983; Wegner, Vallacher, Macomber, Wood, & Arps, 1984, Exp. 2). Wegner et al. (1984, Exp. 2), for example, demonstrated that simply having subjects drink coffee from a heavy, unwieldy cup sensitized them to a host of lower level aspects of coffee drinking (lifting a cup, swallowing, tasting, etc.).

Action disruption is not always necessary to induce low level prepotence, however. In some contexts, merely asking people to list or otherwise monitor the details of their behavior is sufficient to promote a relatively low level understanding of what they are doing (Wegner, Vallacher, Kiersted, & Dizadji, 1986, Experiment 2; Wegner et al., 1984, Experiment 1). Like disruption, such inducements to low level identification would be expected to enhance performance on subjectively difficult tasks, but to prove nonoptimal on tasks that are subjectively easy for the performer.

OPTIMALITY VERSUS NONOPTIMALITY IN SELF-PRESENTATION

Vallacher et al. (1989) recently assessed the validity of the optimality hypothesis in the context of speech fluency. Subjects were asked to

deliver a prepared speech over a video camera to either an easy-to-persuade audience or a difficult-to-persuade audience. Subjects in a high level condition were led to think about the action's significance (e.g., its goal of persuasion). Subjects in a low level condition were induced to consider the mechanics of their communication by means of a disruption manipulation. Specifically, they were asked to monitor a red signal light attached to the video camera that was said to blink whenever their voice quality was too weak to be recorded. As it happened, the light blinked several times during subjects' speech. On seeing the blinking light, subjects were to raise their voice slightly and speak a little more deliberately. As predicted, subjects made fewer speech errors (e.g., stutters, unfilled pauses) and felt more satisfied with their performance when the task was personally easy and identified at high level and when the task was personally difficult and identified at low level.

To extend the performance optimality hypothesis to self-presentation effectiveness, subjects in the present study were asked to describe themselves to someone of the same sex in advance of a get-acquainted conversation. For half the subjects, the future interaction partner was described as very easy to impress in initial encounters; for the remaining subjects, the partner was described as very difficult to impress. As in the Vallacher et al. (1989) study, the manipulation of task difficulty was cross-cut with a manipulation of subjects' identification level with respect to their self-description task. The manipulation of high level identification was similar to that employed in Vallacher et al. (1989), in that subjects were kept mindful of the goals of their self-description (e.g., impressing the person, striking up a friendship).

In a departure from the Vallacher et al. (1989) study, however, low level identification was induced by simply asking subjects to attend to the details of what they were doing rather than by means of a disruption manipulation. This was done for two reasons. First, we wanted to show the the generality of low level identification effects across different operational variations. Second, as noted in Vallacher et al. (1989), the use of a disruptive stimulus is open to at least three alternative interpretations—misattribution (Ross & Olson, 1981; Schachter, 1964), self-handicapping (Jones & Berglas, 1978), and distraction (Sanders, Baron, & Moore, 1978)—each of which has been linked in its own right to performance effectiveness. While the data obtained in Vallacher et al. (1989) are not compatible with these alternative interpretations of disruption, but are wholly consistent with an identification level interpretation, it was deemed desirable in the present study to provide a manipulation of low level identification that was not reminiscent of misattribution, self-handicapping, or distraction.

Self-presentation effectiveness was assessed both through subjects' self-reports and yoked observers' impressions of subjects. We predicted that when the ostensible interaction partner was described as easy to impress in get-acquainted settings, subjects would present themselves more effectively by both sets of criteria when induced to think about their self-presentation in high level as opposed to low level terms. When the ostensible interaction partner was described as hard to impress, however, subjects were expected to be more effective when induced to think about their behavior in lower level terms.

METHOD

OVERVIEW

Eighty undergraduates (20 men, 60 women) participated individually in exchange for extra credit in their psychology courses. Half the subjects served as communicators and half as same-sex yoked observers. Communicator subjects described themselves over a video arrangement, ostensibly to a same-sex target as part of a purported get-acquainted situation. The target was described as either very easy or very difficult to impress in get-acquainted situations. Half the communicator subjects in each target difficulty condition were induced to think about the details of their self-presentation by means of written reminders; the others were reminded that the goal of their self-presentation was to impress the target. Observer subjects (10 men, 30 women) individually viewed the tape made by a same-sex communicator subject, with the expectation that they would subsequently engage in a brief get-acquainted conversation with him or her. Dependent measures included communicator subjects' self-reports of self-presentation success and style, and observer subjects' impressions of communicator subjects.

COMMUNICATOR SUBJECTS' PARTICIPATION

One of two female experimenters escorted the subject to a small (10 ft. x 10 ft.) lab equipped with a 20-in color TV monitor, a color VCR (1/2 in) positioned on top of the monitor, and a color video camera attached to a tripod positioned to the right of the monitor. The subject was seated at the table on which the monitor and VCR were placed so that he or she could view the monitor and be filmed by the camera. The experimenter explained that the purpose of the study was to study first

impressions in a get-acquainted conversation, and informed the subject that he or she would have a brief (15 min) interaction with a same-sexed stranger (target) in an adjacent room. The subject was then told that prior to the interaction, both the subject and the target would have a chance to learn a little about one another. The experimenter went on to explain that the target had been asked to write a brief essay in response to the question, "What qualities do you look for in other people?," and that the subject would have an opportunity to read this essay so as to gain preliminary insight into what the target was like. The subject then was told that after reading the essay, he or she would answer a few questions about him or herself to a video camera and that the target would be observing these answers over a video monitor so as to gain preliminary insight into what the subject was like.

Impression Task Difficulty. The subject was then given one of two handwritten essays ostensibly written by the target in response to the question, "How do you evaluate new acquaintances?" Both versions began by emphasizing clearly socially desirable qualities (e.g., "I like people who are warm and sociable") but concluded with different likelihoods of finding people with such qualities. The version read by subjects in the easy target condition was optimistic in this regard and suggested that the target was easy to impress:

When you really get down to it, everyone has at least some of the qualities I've mentioned. The trick is to give people a fair chance to show what they're really like instead of always looking for their flaws or waiting for them to screw up. . . I really appreciate it when people don't worry too much about how they're coming across but rather just relax and act naturally. When the people I meet do that, they almost always impress me with their basic goodness. . . Maybe that makes me a little gullible, but I figure it's better to assume the best until proven wrong.

In contrast, the version read by subjects in the difficult target condition indicated that the person was highly pessimistic about finding desirable people and hence very difficult to impress:

Unfortunately, not too many people have these sorts of qualities. Of course, practically everyone pretends they are smart and unselfish and all that, but usually that is just an act designed to impress you. I've been burned enough by phonies that I can usually spot one a mile away. . . So when I first meet someone, I examine everything they say and do pretty carefully, trying to figure out how they really feel. Maybe that makes me a little skeptical about new people, but I figure it's better to be safe than sorry.

The subject was given approximately two minutes to read the essay, after which he or she completed a 7-item questionnaire assessing his or her initial impressions of the other person. The subject's responses to this questionnaire served as a check on the effectiveness of the impression task difficulty manipulation.

The subject was then informed that it was his or her turn to provide information about him or herself to the target. The subject was told that he or she would be given five topics or personal questions, one at a time, and that he or she would respond to each by speaking to the target over the video camera. The subject was given approximately two minutes to respond to each topic/question before being given the next topic/question. The five topics/questions (in order of presentation) were: (1) Living in South Florida; (2) College courses currently taken or taken previously; (3) "Basically, what kind of person are you? How would you describe your personality?"; (4) "How do you think other people perceive you? Would they agree with the way you see yourself?"; and (5) Career plans or goals. The experimenter left the subject alone in the room during each of the five presentations.

Identification Level. Before providing the subject the first topic, the experimenter gave him or her a list of "things to remember" during the video presentation. The subject was asked to study the list carefully before beginning the first presentation, and prior to each of the subsequent four presentations was asked to review it again. Each reminder on the list was printed in capital letters and surrounded by asterisks in order to heighten its salience. Subjects in the low level condition were told to remember the following: "choose your words carefully;" "speak slowly and clearly;" "speak with confidence, be direct;" "be aware of your facial expressions;" and "maintain eye contact with the camera." Subjects in the high level condition, in turn, were told to remember: "you are trying to get this person to form a favorable impression of you;" "this person is learning about you from your answers;" "you are revealing what you are like to this person;" "you are demonstrating your social skills;" and "you are being evaluated by this person." Both sets of identities were generated in pilot research by 20 undergraduates who were asked to imagine themselves in the role of communicator subjects (i.e., describing themselves to a stranger over a video hook-up). Half the pilot subjects were asked to think of all the things they would be doing *as part of* describing themselves in such an arrangement and half were asked to think of all the things they would be doing *as a result of* describing themselves under those conditions (cf. Wegner et al., 1984). The "as part of" and "as a result of" instructional sets promoted a wide variety

of relatively low and high level identities, respectively, including those subsequently employed as manipulations of low and high level.

Upon completion of the final video presentation, subjects were administered a questionnaire assessing various aspects of their self-perceived performance. They then completed an action identification questionnaire which asked them to rate how well each of 15 act identities described what they had done in the self-presentation task. Finally, subjects were thoroughly debriefed, assigned their extra credit, sworn to secrecy, and dismissed.

OBSERVER SUBJECTS' PARTICIPATION

Like the communicator subjects, the observer subjects expected to have a brief (15 min) interaction with a same-sexed stranger. They were informed that this person, who was said to be waiting in a nearby room, had provided responses to a series of questions a few minutes earlier, with the understanding that a videotape of these responses would be played to a same-sex stranger (i.e., the observer subject) prior to a get-acquainted conversation with him or her. Observers were told nothing about the manipulations of impression task difficulty or identification level experienced by the communicator subject. They then individually viewed one of the communicator tapes, ostensibly to provide them with preliminary insight into the person's personality prior to their get-acquainted conversation. Observers were instructed to view the tape carefully and to form impressions of the communicator. The assignment of observers to communicators was random, with the constraint that each observer-communicator pair be of the same sex.

Following observation of the tape, observers completed a questionnaire tapping their impressions of the communicator and his or her video performance. After completing the questionnaire, they were informed of the condition assignments characterizing the communicator subject they had viewed, and debriefed regarding the purpose and hypotheses of the study. When probed for suspicion, none of the observer subjects reported disbelief that the interaction with the person on the tape would take place. Several of them did report having some doubt in this regard, but suspending this doubt when viewing the tape so as not to approach the possible interaction unprepared.

DEPENDENT MEASURES

Self-Perceived Performance. On completion of the self-presentation task, subjects were administered a 13-item questionnaire assessing (on

7-point scales) their thoughts and feelings during the task. Factor analysis (principal axis rotated to a varimax solution) of their responses yielded two interpretable factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0. The factors (and their associated items and factor loadings) were Impression Success (do you feel that this person will like you?, .87; "overall, do you think that you favorably impressed the other person with your personality?," .68; "how much do you expect the interaction with this person to be enjoyable?," .64; rating of self-confidence during the task, .67; "for each question I had a general idea or plan for what I was going to say," .40; "do you expect the interaction with this person to be pleasant or awkward?," -.26; alpha = .85) and Interaction Style (ratings of insincerity, -.85, and naturalness, .47, during the interaction; alpha = .58). Subjects' score on each factor was the mean of their responses (reverse-scored when necessary) to the items loading on that factor. High scores on each factor reflect positive self-assessment (i.e., greater impression success and better style).

Observers' Ratings. Observer subjects completed a questionnaire calling for ratings of the communicator subject on twelve items paralleling the dimensions employed in communicator subjects' self-assessment questionnaire. Factor analysis of their responses yielded two factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0, but these factors differed from those underlying communicators' self-assessment. The observer factors (and their associated items and factor loadings) were Relaxation (ratings of relaxation, .75, anxiety, -.71, self-confidence, .71, comfortableness, .68, and self-consciousness, -.47; alpha = .85) and Desirability (overall, did this individual favorably impress you with his or her personality?, .72; "with respect to what you have seen from the presentation, do you like this individual?," .72; alpha = .82). Observers' score on each factor was the mean rating (reverse scored when necessary) across the items loading on that factor. High scores on each factor reflect positive impressions of the communicator subject (i.e., greater relaxation and desirability) on the part of his or her yoked observer.¹

1. We also ran a group of observers who viewed the communicator's tape without expecting to interact subsequently with him or her. In contrast to the factor structure reported above, analysis of these observers' ratings revealed that a single dimension was tapped by all the items (alpha = .87), suggesting that they judged the communicator in global terms rather than with respect to specific dimensions such as relaxation and desirability. Lacking a sense of interdependency with the communicator (cf. Jones & Thibaut, 1958; Knight & Vallacher, 1981), these observers apparently were not motivated to evaluate him or her carefully (i.e., as a potential interaction partner), and hence did not attend to the nuances of his or her self-presentation. Feedback during debriefing confirmed this inference regarding subjects' attitude toward the observation task. The data from these subjects thus are not presented in the present article, although they are available upon request from the first author.

Postpresentation Action Identification. Communicator subjects completed a questionnaire consisting of 15 identities for the self-presentation task that had been generated in pilot research. Subjects rated each identity on a 7-point scale according to how well it described what they were doing in delivering their presentations. Factor analysis (principal axis, varimax rotation) of these ratings revealed three interpretable factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0. The factors (and their associated items and factor loadings) were: Revealing What I Am Like (expressed my opinions and values," .88; "revealed things about myself," .84; "revealed my basic personality," .80; "communicated in a sincere fashion," .80; "made use of my social skills," .67; "tried to speak confidently and directly," .65; alpha = .92); Low Level (was conscious of my facial expressions," .83; "tried to smile when appropriate," .67; "thought about what to say next," .67; "chose my words carefully," .50; alpha = .76); and Preparing for The Interaction (tried to get the person to like me," .78; "attempted to strike up a friendship," .74; alpha = .70). Subjects' score on each factor was their mean endorsement of the identities loading on that factor (cf. Vallacher & Wegner, 1985).

RESULTS

MANIPULATION CHECKS

Impression Task Difficulty. After reading the essay ostensibly written by the target, communicator subjects completed a brief questionnaire assessing their impressions of the partner. Four of these questions were directly relevant to the impression task difficulty manipulation, and on each one an ANOVA corresponding to the study's design revealed a highly reliable effect for that variable. Specifically, as compared to subjects who read the easy target essay, those who read the difficult target essay were less likely to feel the target gets along well with a wide variety of people ($M = 2.76$ vs. 5.28 on a 7-point scale), $F(1,36) = 35.4$, $p < .001$, were more likely to feel the target has a skeptical rather than an accepting attitude toward new acquaintances ($M = 6.08$ vs. 1.76), $F(1,36) = 146.6$, $p < .001$, were more likely to feel the target evaluates new acquaintances by scrutinizing everything they say or do ($M = 4.84$ vs. 1.64), $F(1,36) = 40.7$, $p < .001$, and were more likely to feel the target is less sensitive to people's strengths and assets than to their apparent weaknesses ($M = 4.08$ vs. 2.20), $F(1,36) = 13.6$, $p < .001$. No other effects were observed for these items.

Identification Level. Communicator subjects in this study completed the identification questionnaire after their video presentations. Their

responses thus indicate how the act appeared to them on completion of their self-presentation rather than how it was identified in advance. To assess whether the identification-level manipulation was effective in establishing the desired identification tendencies at the outset, pilot subjects ($N = 60$) were informed of either the low-level or the high-level situation and asked to imagine that they made a video self-presentation under such conditions. They then completed the action identification questionnaire described earlier and were assigned scores corresponding to their mean endorsement of the identities loading on each of the factors associated with this questionnaire. As anticipated, the low-level factor was endorsed more strongly by subjects in the low-level as opposed to the high-level condition ($M = 5.54$ vs. 4.82), $F(1,58) = 4.55$, $p < .04$. Subjects in the low- and high-level conditions did not reliably differ in their endorsement of any of the other factors.

SELF-PRESENTATION EFFECTIVENESS

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) performed on the four effectiveness measures (two communicator self-perception measures and two observer rating measures) revealed a reliable Impression Task Difficulty \times Identification Level interaction, $F(4,33) = 3.25$, $p < .02$. Multivariate simple effects analyses performed to reveal the precise nature of this interaction revealed that (1) in the low level condition, subjects presented themselves more effectively when the ostensible target was difficult as opposed to easy to impress, $F(4,33) = 3.09$, $p < .03$, and (2) in the difficult target condition, low level subjects tended to present themselves more effectively than did high level subjects, $F(4,33) = 2.57$, $p < .06$. Univariate analyses of variance, meanwhile, revealed a reliable Difficulty \times Identification Level interaction for impression success, $F(1,36) = 6.23$, $p < .02$, interaction style, $F(1,36) = 6.92$, $p < .01$, and relaxation, $F(1,36) = 5.61$, $p < .02$, and a nonsignificant interaction for desirability, $F(1,36) = 1.92$, $p < .17$. As is apparent in Figures 1-4, the pattern of means underlying each interaction is consistent with the optimality hypothesis.

To assess the reliability of this pattern for each effectiveness measure, we performed simple effects analyses that compared low level versus high level identification within each target difficulty condition. Support for the optimality hypothesis was obtained in the difficult target condition for three of the four measures: as compared to high level subjects, low level subjects felt they had presented themselves more effectively ($M = 3.72$ vs. 2.91), $F(1,36) = 3.87$, $p < .05$, were perceived as more relaxed (less anxious) by observers ($M = 3.65$ vs. 2.64), $F(1,36) =$

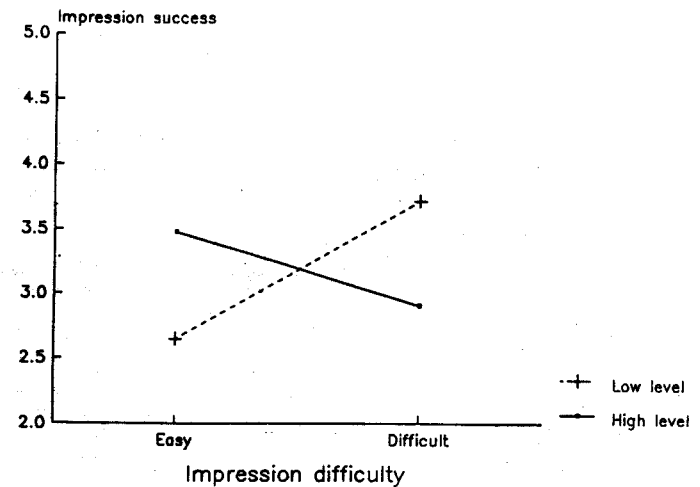


FIGURE 1
Impression Success by Impression
Difficulty and Identification Level

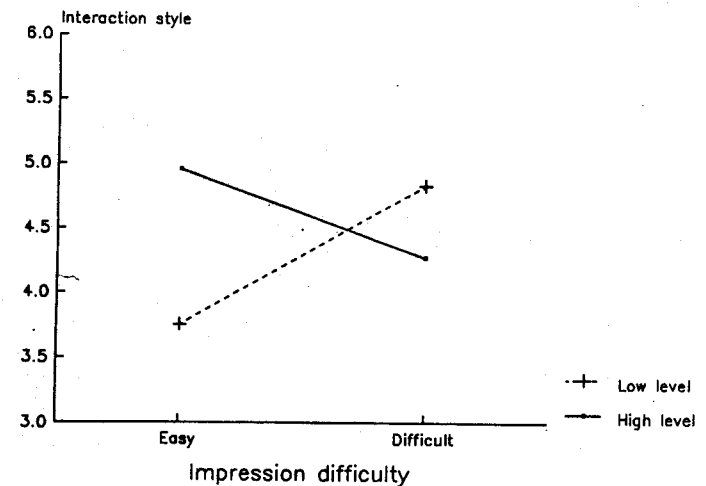


FIGURE 2
Interaction Style by Impression
Difficulty and Identification Level

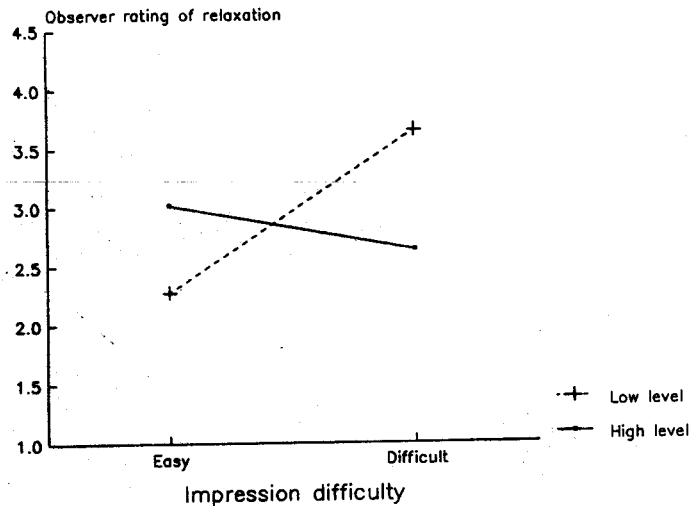


FIGURE 3
Observer Rating of Relaxation by Impression
Difficulty and Identification Level

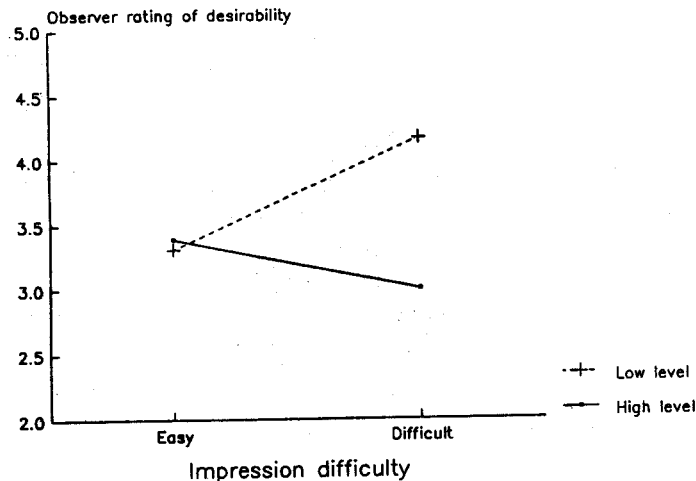


FIGURE 4
Observer Rating of Desirability by Impression
Difficulty and Identification Level

4.38, $p < .04$, and were also judged to be more desirable by observers ($M = 4.17$ vs. 3.00), $F(1,36) = 3.99$, $p < .05$. The complementary tendency for high level subjects to be more effective in the easy target condition was reliable for interaction style ($M = 4.94$ vs. 3.75), $F(1,36) = 5.57$, $p < .02$, and marginally reliable for impression success ($M = 3.48$ vs. 2.65), $F(1,36) = 2.78$, $p < .10$.²

Correlational analyses, meanwhile, revealed that the similarity in the observed pattern of effects for self and observer ratings was manifest at the level of individual differences. In particular, self-rated impression success was reliably correlated with observers' rating of relaxation, $r(40) = .26$, $p < .05$, and self-rated interaction style tended to be associated with observers' rating of desirability, $r(40) = .18$, $p < .10$. Thus, communicators who felt good about their presentation were in fact judged relatively favorably by observers.

POSTPRESENTATION ACTION IDENTIFICATION

The identification of one's action typically changes as a result of performing the action (cf. Vallacher & Wegner, 1985). To gauge how subjects in this study viewed their action on completion of their self-presentation, we performed ANOVAs on the three action identification factors. Results revealed a marginally reliable identification level effect for the low level factor, $F(1,36) = 3.05$, $p < .09$, such that subjects in the low level condition identified their behavior in the self-presentation task in lower level terms ($M = 4.00$) than did subjects in the high level condition ($M = 3.29$). Apparently, the manipulation of identification level was sufficiently strong to keep subjects differentially mindful of the low level aspects of what they were doing throughout the self-presentation task.

The only other effect approaching statistical significance was a difficulty \times identification level interaction for Revealing What I Am Like, $F(1,36) = 2.14$, $p < .15$. The pattern of means underlying this interaction resembles that associated with the performance effective-

2. We also performed simple effects analyses with the data blocked on identification level. For three of the performance measures, results revealed a statistically reliable difference in the low level condition between subjects presenting themselves to an easy versus a difficult target: $F(1,36) = 5.23$, $p < .03$, for impression success; $F(1,36) = 5.19$, $p < .03$, for interaction style; and $F(1,36) = 6.74$, $p < .01$, for observers' ratings of relaxation. In each case, subjects were more effective with the difficult target than with the easy target (see Figures 1-3). In the high level condition, there was an unreliable difference between easy target and difficult target subjects for impression success, $F(1,36) = 1.72$, $p < .20$, and for interaction style, $F(1,36) = 2.16$, $p < .15$.

TABLE 1
Endorsement of "Revealing What I Am Like" by
Target Difficulty and Identification Level

TARGET DIFFICULTY	IDENTIFICATION LEVEL	
	HIGH	LOW
Easy	4.76 _{ab}	4.10
Difficult	4.75 _{ab}	5.39 _a

Note. Means not sharing a common subscript differ at $p < .05$.

ness measures (see Table 1). Thus, subjects were most likely to identify their behavior as revealing their personality, making use of their social skills, and so forth under the combination of conditions—low level identification and difficult target—that promoted the greatest self-presentation effectiveness. Correlational analyses corroborated this association: endorsement of these identities was reliably correlated with impression success, $r(40) = .69$, $p < .001$, interaction style, $r(40) = .71$, $p < .001$, and desirability, $r(40) = .26$, $p < .05$.

DISCUSSION

The results of this experiment suggest that effectiveness in self-presentation conforms to the optimality hypothesis of action identification theory. When describing themselves to a difficult-to-impress stranger in anticipation of an interaction with him or her, subjects who identified the self-presentation task in low level terms felt they had presented themselves in a more favorable light than did subjects who focused instead on the higher level goals of their self-presentation. Among subjects anticipating interaction with an easy-to-impress target, meanwhile, subjects who identified the self-presentation task in high level terms felt more natural and sincere than did subjects who focused on the lower level features of self-presentation. The optimality pattern was reflected as well in observers' judgments. Communicators were judged to be most relaxed and likable if they presented themselves to a difficult-to-impress target, provided they did so with a focus on the lower level as opposed to higher level identities of the communication task.

It is worth noting that the manipulation of low level identification in this study is not open to the sorts of alternative interpretations associated with disruption-induced low level identification (e.g., Vallacher et al., 1989; Wegner et al., 1984, Experiment 2). Thus, the

reminder to subjects to think about the mechanical features of describing themselves (e.g., choosing words carefully, speaking slowly and clearly, being aware of facial expressions) was not introduced as a plausible source of physiological arousal, so it is unlikely to have had its effect by virtue of misattribution principles (Ross & Olson, 1981). Nor was the reminder presented as a possible impediment to poor performance—if anything, it was presented in the spirit of *facilitating* performance—so its role cannot be interpreted in terms of self-handicapping principles (Jones & Berglas, 1978).

The low level reminder, moreover, can hardly be construed as a distraction that interfered with the task at hand (Sanders et al., 1978), since task attention is *defined* by many in terms of an act's lower level features (e.g., Kimble & Perlmutter, 1970; Langer & Imber, 1979). If anything, then, keeping subjects mindful of the mechanical features of what they were doing should have enhanced their attention to the task, in much the same way that admonitions to "keep your eyes on the ball" is said to enhance task attention in sports performance. From a different perspective, though, the low level reminder manipulation could be seen as a distraction in that it drew subjects' attention away from a concern with possible self-presentation failure. This sort of redirection of attention from possible negative consequences might have defused subjects' anxiety, enabling them to perform up to their capacity. This view of distraction in fact captures a portion of the optimality hypothesis; namely, the inappropriateness of high level identification (e.g., a concern with success and failure) for performance on a difficult task. At the same time, though, it fails to capture the *heightened* prepotence of the lower level aspects of the self-presentation task and the optimality of that mental set for self-presentation to a difficult-to-impress target.

Although the data generally support optimality considerations, it is also the case that identification level had a greater effect on subjects' self-presentation success in the difficult-to-impress condition than in the easy-to-impress condition. This could simply mean that whether one thinks about one's behavior in low versus high level terms does not matter as much when presenting oneself to an easy-to-impress person. Extrapolating from the present data, the primary drawback to low level identification when facing someone who is inclined to be positive may be merely a heightened self-perception of insincerity and unnaturalness. Perhaps adopting a strategic, how-to approach toward relationship formation with someone who has a trusting, receptive attitude makes one feel manipulative and uncomfortable—in much the same way that one feels funny about stealing candy from a baby.

Alternatively, the asymmetry in data between the difficult and easy

conditions could reflect an asymmetry in how these conditions were manipulated—or can be manipulated in principle. To be sure, the manipulation checks confirmed that the difficult-to-impress target was indeed more skeptical, cautious, and so on than was the easy-to-impress target. These are relative differences, however, and may exist in the context of a relatively low ceiling for self-presentation ease. As Jones (1964; Jones & Pittman, 1982) has noted, by their very nature certain forms of self-presentation are fraught with difficulty, essentially doomed to wariness if not suspicion on the part of the target. With respect to the present study, something akin to the ingratiator's dilemma may have established a baseline of difficulty for the self-presentation task, even among subjects presenting themselves to the easy-to-impress target. Subjects' ratings of impression ease on the manipulation check items, then, might simply have reflected a sense of relative ease with respect to an inherently difficult task. If so, the present study could be viewed as having provided a partial test of the optimality hypothesis—namely, a comparison between a highly difficult and a somewhat less difficult impression task.

It remains for further research, of course, to establish which of these alternative interpretations best accounts for the generally weaker effects of identification level in the easy as opposed to difficult target conditions. One possibility in this regard would be to provide subjects with self-presentation goals that are not as inherently difficult to achieve as is simple ingratiation. Intimidation, exemplification, and supplication, for example, are typically discussed without reference to dilemma and paradox (Jones & Pittman, 1982), as is the self-presentation of modesty (e.g., Schneider & Eustis, 1972; Vallacher et al., 1987). Conceivably, focusing only on the lower level features of self-description when facing someone who is exceptionally easy to intimidate, supplicate, and so on, would undermine one's effectiveness relative to remaining mindful of the self-presentation goal itself.

The data from this study have their clearest implications for the initial stages of a relationship. Indeed, one could argue that the earliest encounters between two people are essentially defined in terms of self-presentation concerns (cf. Goffman, 1959). Coupled with the heightened salience of conveying a specific image of oneself in such encounters is a fair degree of intrinsic difficulty in achieving such goals. Each party to the encounter, after all, is acutely sensitive not only to his or her desires to be seen in a certain way, but to the parallel desires of the other person. The upshot is that both people are trying to project an image of self to someone else who is likely to be vigilant regarding such projections. When cast in action identification terms, the initial stages

of a relationship can thus be characterized as a special case of nonoptimality: high level identification of a difficult task. Such a mismatch between goal salience and task difficulty could be at the root of the self-consciousness, awkwardness, and so on that is all too often part and parcel of our initial interactions with others. The data from this study suggest that under these conditions, a person would be well-advised to think about his or her self-presentation in relatively low level terms.

In this regard, one is reminded of Dale Carnegie's (1940) perspective on winning friends and influencing people. Although Carnegie provided a number of general tips and admonitions that could be construed as higher level act identities (e.g., appear interested in what the other person says, avoid arguing with the him or her), his primary concern was with the lower level, "how-to" components of influence attempts (e.g., always smile, address the person by name, maintain eye contact). From the present perspective, the soundness of such advice does not derive so much from the specific lower level identities suggested, but from its sensitization to the lower level features of an act that we normally think about in inappropriately goal-oriented terms. Somewhat paradoxically, the best way to achieve one's most difficult self-presentation goals is to suspend them in favor of more modest aims.

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