

Paulhus, D.L. (2003).

In R. Fernandez-Ballesteros (Ed.)

Encyclopedia of psychological
assessment (pp. 858-861).

Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

S SELF-PRESENTATION MEASUREMENT

INTRODUCTION

Self-presentation is the generic term for the human tendency to describe oneself in a self-serving fashion. Because this tendency is assumed to interfere with accurate psychological assessment, much work has been put into devising methods to measure and control for self-presentation. For reviews, see Paulhus (1991) and the entry on 'Self-Report Distortions' in this volume.

Assessment psychologists would prefer to eliminate or, at least, identify sources of variance

that are irrelevant to the attributes being measured (e.g. traits, values, attitudes). Self-presentation is usually assumed to fall in this irrelevant category. Sometimes it is - for example, when a random subset of job applicants is so motivated to land the job that they are faking good. When self-presentation is stable across time and assessment context, however, self-presentation tendencies are called response styles. Because consistent styles must have their own cognitive and/or motivational roots, they can be studied as personality traits in their own right. And their manifestations of self-presentation are likely to go

well beyond biased behaviour on self-report instruments.

In this entry, three types of such styles are distinguished and substantiated with popular examples. The first type comprises trait measures of self-aware tendencies to engage in self-presentation (e.g. Self-Monitoring Scale). The second category comprises measures that diagnose the overall social desirability of current responding (e.g. the Impression Management scale). The third category comprises self-deceptive biases in self-descriptions (e.g. the Narcissistic Personality Inventory).

TYPE 1: SELF-AWARE PREDICTORS OF TRAIT SELF-PRESENTATION

This type refers to measures where respondents accurately report their tendencies toward self-presentation. The classic example is Snyder's (1974) construct of self-monitoring. Although it began with a conception closely linked to the clinical definition (see the entry on 'Self-Observation' in this volume), Snyder's construct is now quite distinct. In the most recent elaboration, self-monitoring is described as the active construction of public selves designed to achieve social ends; that is, favourable outcomes (Gangestad & Snyder, 2000).

The instrument designed to assess the construct – Snyder's (1974) Self-Monitoring Scale – has been immensely popular. Median reliabilities are 0.71 (α) and 0.73 (2-week test-retest). One repeated criticism concerned the multidimensionality of the original 25 item SMS (e.g. Briggs & Cheek, 1988) and even of the reduced 18-item version (Romera, Luengo, Garra & Otero-Lopez, 1994).

Nonetheless, the SMS has proved especially useful as a pre-test before laboratory studies of self-presentation. For example, it has been shown to predict who will manipulate their self-descriptions to get a date (Rowatt, Cunningham & Druen, 1998). Critics have replied that the bulk of its successful predictions derive from its major component, extraversion (John, Cheek & Klohnen, 1996).

A more complex instrument in this category is the Social Skills Inventory (e.g. Riggio, Watring & Throckmorton, 1993). Respondents are asked about a wide variety of social skills such as empathy, and perspective taking. Again,

extraversion appears to be a significant underlying component of this measure.

TYPE 2: DIAGNOSTIC INDICATORS OF IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

This second type of measure indexes the total amount of positivity in an individual's self-descriptions. One example is the Impression Management (IM) scale (Paulhus, 1991). Typical reliabilities are 0.80, for internal consistency, and 0.76 for 4 month test-retest reliability. The Marlowe-Crowne scale and various lie-scales also fall into this category.

These measures are often used to diagnose desirability response sets: that is, the degree to which respondents have engaged in impression management while completing a battery of self-report measures. Temporary distortion can arise from any number of sources; for example, high motivation among some applicants or patients to appear positive to an interviewer. Trait contributions include the tendency to avoid negative self-presentations (Paulhus, 1991).

Unfortunate for the simple self-presentation interpretation is that some high scorers are accurately reporting that they have desirable traits, in particular traits such as agreeableness, and responsibility (McCrae & Costa, 1983). Interpretation of the scores as a desirability response set can certainly be ruled out if the self-report conditions entail no demand for self-presentation; for example, anonymous administration.

An unassailable usage for type 2 measures is for indexing situational differences in demand for self-presentation: since mean levels are being compared, no interpretation of individual differences is involved.

TYPE 3: SELF-DECEPTIVE SELF-ENHANCEMENT

Some individuals seem to believe their own exaggerated self-descriptions. Presumably, this tendency requires a degree of self-deception to ignore or distort information that would undermine a biased self-view (Paulhus, 1986). The classic example is the narcissistic personality who continually enhances the self and derogates others because of a belief that he/she is superior to

others (e.g. Morf & Rhodewalt, in press; Paulhus, 1998). A solid body of evidence on so-called 'normal narcissists' has demonstrated that their self-descriptions are exaggerated even when the administration is anonymous. The most popular measure of this type is the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Hall, 1981). Typical reliabilities are 0.78 for internal consistency and 0.74 for a 2-month test-retest reliability. Another such measure is the Self-Deceptive Enhancement scale (Paulhus, 1991).

COMPARISONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Each category of measures reviewed here involves a different linkage between a self-presentation style and a tendency to engage in self-presentation. High scores on Type 1 and Type 3 measures identify individuals who possess the type of character prone to self-presentation (e.g. self-monitors and narcissists). Such measures allow prediction of who will self-enhance in the future: (1) Type 3 chronically self-enhances and (2) Type 1 enhances when opportune. In contrast, Type 2 measures indicate who is currently giving desirable answers.

Consider a study where the SMS (Type 1), the IM scale (Type 2), and the NPI (Type 3) are administered twice – the second time under a demand for positive self-presentation. Scores on the SMS and NPI should change very little and can be used to predict relative degrees of self-enhancement behaviour at time 1 or time 2. But, because scores on the SMS or NPI are not responsive to situational demand, they cannot be used to indicate the absolute level of self-presentation. In contrast, Type 2 measures such as the IM scale will be higher at time 2 because they measure absolute levels of self-presentation: their interpretation at time 1 should be in terms of valid personality differences.

The different styles of self-presentation tapped by measures of Types 1 and 3 is reflected in the flexibility of their self-presentation. A situational deterrent such as accountability will alter the self-presentation behaviour of self-monitors but not that of narcissists. Attempts to embarrass or confront the latter do not seem to have any effect (Robins & John, 1997): narcissist self-enhancement cannot be bridled.

CONCLUSIONS

Self-presentation is among the most complex of human behaviours. Accordingly, the analysis and diagnosis of self-presentation as a style is a challenging problem to assessment psychologists. The above analysis suggests guidelines but is surely not the final word.

More work is required to compare the three categories of self-presentation styles head-to-head across a variety of circumstances. One new but already active issue concerns differences in self-presentational style across the type of content that is being self-presented. Paulhus and John (1998) have argued that the content of self-presentation styles involves the two primary human values of agency and communion. So far, available measures in this category emphasize self-enhancement that is agentic; that is, emphasizing competence and energy. Yet to be developed is a corresponding measure of moralistic or communal self-enhancement.

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RELATED ENTRIES

SELF-REPORTS (GENERAL), SELF-REPORT DISTORTIONS, SELF-REPORT QUESTIONNAIRES, SELF-REPORTS IN BEHAVIOURAL CLINICAL SETTINGS, SELF-REPORTS IN WORK AND ORGANIZATIONAL SETTINGS