



## Doing as if: The histrionic self-presentation style <sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

The histrionic self-presentation style is introduced as a concept that describes specific individual differences in self-presentation, namely, performing explicit As-If-behaviors in everyday interactions. The As-If-Scale (AIS), a trait measure of histrionic self-presentation, shows good internal consistency and test–retest reliability as well as convergent and discriminant validity in several samples. Construct validation involved determining relations between the AIS and the Big Five, histrionic role concepts, motives, competencies, humor and ambivalence. Furthermore, the AIS yielded incremental validity in predicting behaviors related to histrionic self-presentation over and above the self-monitoring construct. The possible impact of the histrionic style for research on self-presentation and other fields is discussed. It is argued that histrionic phenomena are pervasive within many facets of our western culture and therefore deserve further examination.

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### 1. Introduction

The term *histrionic* stems from the Latin word *histrion* that was originally used to signify a travelling Etruscan entertainer and later an actor in ancient Rome. In the current Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders–Fourth Edition, Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR, American Psychiatric Association, 2000), the term *histrionic* is used to denote a specific kind of personality disorder. In the DSM-IV-TR, the *histrionic personality disorder* is described as a pervasive pattern of excessive emotionality and attention seeking beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts. Some of the main diagnostic criteria involve feeling uncomfortable in situations in which he or she is not the center of attention, rapidly shifting and shallow expression of emotions and self-dramatization, theatricality and exaggerated expression of emotion. In our view, non-pathological forms of the *histrionic personality disorder* have not been sufficiently considered in previous research (see however Kuhl, 2000). Consequently, we would like to address advantages of a *histrionic self-presentation style* without losing sight of possible risks.

We define *histrionic self-presentation* as a way of shaping everyday interactions by explicit As-If-behaviors. *Histrionic self-presenters* regard daily situations as opportunities for role playing and for transforming such situations into “dramatic scenes”. As-If-behaviors are specific forms of impression management that may be analyzed as social psychological phenomena. By introducing a *histrionic self-presentation style*, however, we suggest a personality variable that concerns individual differences in using As-If-behaviors to shape everyday interactions. To illustrate the concept of explicit As-If-behaviors, the key characteristic of *histrionic self-presentation*, we would like to give two examples.

A male participant in one of our studies reported on a discussion about science fiction that came up in his seminar on cinematic theory. During this discussion, a fellow student criticized him stating: “*I don’t understand how you can make such*

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a big deal out of 'Star Wars'. The light sabers—they are pretty ridiculous. A laser gun would be much more effective." At this instant, our participant jumped up, pointed at his fellow-student and yelled, "What a fool you are! Don't you know that the light saber is the Jedi knight's most noble weapon?" Further reflecting on this incident, our participant stated: "I simply performed this quotation from the Star Wars movie and imitated Obi Wan Kenobi. Of course, this made people laugh—the professor as well. And if you do such a thing right away in the first session of class, you obtain a certain kind of status. . ."

A female participant gave an account of a conflict she encountered within her relationship. Her husband is a manager and due to his heavy workload, he has insufficient time for the family. In order to convey her displeasure with the situation, she chose the following wording: 'Hey honey. Can you imagine that our next personnel talk is an evaluation in which we will discuss your lack of compliance with the conditions of our contract?' She went on to describe the reasons for this statement saying: "I said it this way because I didn't want to react angrily. My husband often told me about situations where he had to tell his coworkers that they were being excessively lazy. So, when I spoke, I simply imitated the way my husband would act in such a situation. He replied on the same level and said: 'Well, fortunately there is still enough time up till the next personnel talk to improve my performance and once again meet the terms of the agreement.' We then both laughed and a friendly atmosphere sustained."

In these two examples, the protagonists merely *act as if* they were another person. The male participant imitated a Star Wars character and paraphrased a scene that actually occurs in one of the Star Wars episodes. The female participant intentionally imitated her husband's professional role as a manager. In both examples, these role plays are *explicit*: the interaction partners recognize the As-If-mode of the behaviors and realize that the protagonists are just playing a role like actors on a stage. In the first example, the fellow students and even the professor laughed at the "Star Wars quotation" of the male participant. In the second example, the husband of the female participant even enters into the role play.

Histrionic role playing differs from the broader sociological role construct. Our concept of histrionic role playing is narrower than the role theoretical view of man-as-actor that was endorsed by Erving Goffman (1959). At the heart of histrionic self-presentation is the *short-term* role-playing with its *explicit* performative nature. Such histrionic role plays can sometimes disrupt the sociological role one usually utilizes in everyday life (e.g., the role of a student or wife like in our initial examples). They can also be distinguished from therapeutic or didactic role playing that usually occurs under specific conditions, for example, in a secure therapeutic setting. Furthermore, histrionic role plays are self-induced, whereas therapeutic or didactic role plays are induced by others, e.g., suggested by a counselor during the course of an assertiveness training program.

More similar to our concept of histrionic self-presentation is "Make-believe" as described by Goffman (1974, p. 48f) in his book "Frame Analysis". Make-believe is an . . .

activity that participants treat as an avowed, ostensible imitation or running through of less transformed activity, this being done with the knowledge that nothing practical will come of the doing (. . .) A 'pastime' or 'entertainment' is provided. Typically, participants might be expected to be free of pressing needs before so indulging themselves and to abandon these enjoyments unceremoniously should basic needs or urges become acute. . . (Goffman, 1974, p. 48).

However, as will be shown in the section on motives, histrionic self-presentation is not simply a "pastime" or an activity done solely for the reason of "entertainment".

## 2. Histrionic competencies

The "light saber-episode" of our male participant provides a good starting point to clarify the histrionic ability to quickly change between different roles. Our participant quickly switched into the role of the Star Wars character by utilizing different non-verbal and paraverbal channels: he jumped up, pointed at the fellow-student and presented his message in a thunderous voice (as reported during the interview). This role changing ability also allows the histrionic self-presenter to imitate or re-enact different people or characters while telling a story. Histrionic As-If-behaviors, however, concern more than simple dramatic performances as the "light saber-episode". Histrionic self-presentation must not entail a complete role change on multiple non-verbal and paraverbal channels. Our female participant, for example, only imitated her husband verbally with respect to the content of her message. In her interview, she did not report having changed her voice, facial expression, gesture or posture while imitating her husband. Obviously, short histrionic As-If-behaviors can also be performed on a single expressive channel. Such expressions often involve more subtle forms of communication and may include the use of metaphors, irony or humorous word games, grimaces, rolling one's eyes or modulating one's voice etc. Thus, histrionic As-If-behaviors may occur with varying bandwidths, that is, they may imply more or less verbal, non-verbal and paraverbal expressive channels at the same time. The ability to generate or produce such short As-If-behaviors on different and sometimes single expressive channels is also among the histrionic competencies.

## 3. Motives of histrionic self-presentation

Why do histrionic self-presenters transform daily situations into dramatic scenes? Why do they shape interactions with As-If-behaviors? Based on detailed analyses of single cases, we have derived two basic motives that may guide histrionic self-presentation: tension creation and tension reduction (see also Norton, 1983). Tension creation occurs if histrionic

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